Amantes de la Noche #1

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Amantes de la Noche
(Lovers of the Night)
A *Forever Knight* Fanzine

FOREVER
KNIGHT

The fiction in this zine has been previously published on the Internet.
PLEASE NOTE: Some of the stories in this zine contain sexual themes and violence, and are intended for mature readers.

Table of Contents

Grief by Melissa Taylor 4
Possible Futures by Jamie Melody Randell 8
And They Lived Happily Ever After by Nancy Warlocke 11
Waiting for the Sun by Gabriel McFarlane 16
Everything I need to Know About Life, I Learned From Vachon by Bonnie Purdoe 67
The Other Side of Life by J.S. Levin 68
Somewhere in the Night by Roger Armstrong (AKA Le Phantom) 87
"Ashes to Ashes": The Car Scene by Bonnie Purdoe 88
Vachon by Jamie Melody Randell 90
Protect and Serve by Christina Kamnikar 92
Surprises by Debra Ann Fiorini 156
Faraway Inside 1: Septicemia by Bonnie Purdoe 160
Faraway Inside 2: A Little Death by Bonnie Purdoe 165
The Other Games Vampires Play by Gabriel McFarlane 172
Reunion by J.S. Levin 181

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Hi there . . .

The idea for this zine, and a companion volume which will (hopefully) be out next year, came about at MediaWestCon 1996, when I went on a search for third-season *Forever Knight* fanfic (okay, for Vachon and Tracy fanfic), and managed to find a grand total of one, count 'em one, story I hadn't either written myself or already read on the Net. This struck me as a dreadful situation, so I decided to have a shot at correcting it.

Fanzine editors these days are wildly divided on how to treat fanfic which has previously appeared on the Internet. As a fanzine *reader*, I have a strong preference for seeing it either kept to itself or, at least, clearly labelled as "reprint". On more than one occasion, I've purchased a fanzine, settled down to read it, and discovered to my dismay that I've already read half or more of the material. Therefore, as a fanzine *editor*, I've elected to split my material into two separate categories and zines. The zine you're holding contains *only* stories which have been published electronically on FKFIC-L (the *Forever Knight* fanfic mailing list) or an Internet mailing loop for fans of Vachon. I hope to also publish a companion zine, *The Company of Night*, which will contain nothing but first-run material.

These stories are some of my personal favorites from the wealth of *FK* fanfic which has appeared on-line over the past year or so. They all focus on the new supporting characters introduced in third season—Javier Vachon, Tracy Vetter, Urs and Screed—though some also feature, or give equal time to, the established main cast. I tried to select an interesting mixture of styles—from character vignette to plot-driven adventure—and tones—from dark-and-nasty to comedy relief. So, herein you'll find a comedy which "fixes" the end of the series, and a tragedy which doesn't. A dark and compelling vision of an alternate time line, and a couple of wacky, up-beat tales which shoot off in all directions. Probes into the working of the characters' minds, and speculations on their pasts and their relationships. Generally, a *very* mixed bag, which is how I like it.

What passes for "continuity" in *Forever Knight* as broadcast is at best very loose, and at worst openly and concretely self-contradictory, which results in a wide range of personal interpretations of its rules and limits. This makes for a fascinating, if sometimes wild, ride. You may not agree that everything you find here fits within the boundaries of "canon", but hopefully you'll find it all enjoyable. (I know I didn't—and did.)

To reiterate the warning on the first page of this zine, some of these stories deal with themes and situations intended for mature readers. As you read through, you'll encounter some lovely, up-beat erotica, some sexual content of a darker nature, and a certain amount of violence. In particular, Gabriel's "Waiting for the Sun" is a marvelous, suck-you-in-and-spit-you-out-exhausted sort of read, but portions of it may get a little intense for *extremely* sensitive readers.

I'd like to thank my contributors for allowing me to distribute their work to a wider forum—there are still a large number of fans who haven't surrendered to the mesmerism of the Net—and to my co-editor, Heather, for squeezing some illos into the cracks between professional assignments.

Thanks, too, to those of you who have purchased this zine. You're helping to keep print fandom alive.

I hope you enjoy—

Marg Baskin
1996/07/15

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006

Grief

by Melissa Taylor

It took me an hour to wash my hands after I buried him.

The dirt wasn't that hard to remove, really. It was just river soil, crumbly and soft. I just didn't want to wash away the last bit of contact I had with him.

Is that sick?

I don't care.

I wandered around my apartment and tried to cry. Nothing would come, not even the stingiest of tears. Yet every time I looked at my dirty hands, at the hands that had wrapped his body in heavy velvet and shoveled the dirt over his beautiful face—oh my God, how it had hurt to do that, to listen to the sound of dirt hitting velvet and pattering down to pool darkly around his shoulders—I felt my throat clog up with that ache that comes only from unshed tears.

But I don't cry.

I wash my hands, finally, running my palms under cool water in my kitchen sink. The citrus smell of dishwashing liquid overruns the scent of river, of dirt, of him. My nails—never good to begin with—are ruined, dark with dried blood (mine? his?) and mud. I don't have the strength to scrub. I let the water run and look at the thin blue tracery beneath the skin on my wrists.

I wish I'd let him take me, take what's in my veins and mix it with what once ran in his. I wish I'd told him how I felt, how I loved him, while he was still with me here instead of waiting until he was gone from my life as quickly as he'd entered it so many months ago.

I wish.

I wish.

How do I deal with this? This isn't like my mother's endless drinking or my father's iron control. This isn't like dealing with the snickers and the whispers about the Commissioner's daughter. All of those, I could handle. I have no ruler to measure this by, no example to follow. There is no rule book for a grief so huge that it steals your breath.

I thought he would live forever.

I thought we would have more time.

Oh, Vachon.

❑❑❑❑❑

Night again, and I'm walking into the Station. I feel itchy, shaky. I feel like people are watching me, staring, maybe whispering behind my back. I know none of these things are happening; no one knows. No one knows what I've been through in the past twenty-four hours. It's just my imagination, my own fatigue, my grief.

But I still want to run and hide. I don't want to pretend I feel normal; it's the last thing I feel.

Nick is coming out of Reese's office, and I see my partner do a double take so classic that if I had the energy and the breath for it, I would laugh. Do I look that bad? I don't remember brushing my hair before I left my apartment. I check halfheartedly to make sure buttons are buttoned.

"Tracy?" His voice cracks slightly on my name. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say evenly. "Bad hair day," I add, just for good measure, but the words are clumsy in my mouth.

"Huh. Okay. I guess we should head out, then," Nick says, coming closer, and I edge away without fully realizing I'm doing it. He freezes in place, obviously startled by my reaction, his mouth slightly open.

"Be right back," I tell him, and I head for the ladies' room at something that is faster than a walk but isn't quite a full-out run.

I'm not sure I'll make it in time before I lose it.

I end up in the stall at the very end, on my hands and knees with the pain of it. I can't throw up—there's nothing there—but my body is trying to rid itself of some dark poison anyway. The spasm passes; I lean against cool tile and wish I could die.

It wasn't anything Nick said.

It was the way he smelled.

He smelled like Vachon.

You have to understand this: I loved the way Vachon smelled, especially when he would show up out of literally nowhere, and I'd know he'd flown over the city. He would lean close to me to say something in that smart-assed way of his, and I would catch the scent of wind or rain or ice in his hair. I startled him once by gathering up the heavy gorgeous weight of his dark hair in both hands and simply burying my face in it. His hair had felt like raw silk against my cheek, a whisper against my mouth. He waited politely for a minute or two, then asked me, laughing all the while, what the hell I was doing.

I never explained it to him. I was too embarrassed.

My brain knows that Nick carries the scent of the wind because he probably rode to work with the top down on his Caddy.

My heart, though, isn't buying the explanation.

I read in a neuropsychology textbook that our sense of smell is so acute and finely tuned that we can remember things from decades ago if we're presented with the right olfactory trigger. A ninety-year-old man who can't remember what he had for breakfast can remember the corsage he gave his high-school sweetheart when a nurse waves a bottle of lily-of-the-valley perfume under his nose. He can tell you every detail about that date seventy-four or so years ago, up to and including the spearmint taste of her mouth beneath his. Ask him his name in five minutes, though, and he will regard you with sweet befuddlement.

That will be me in sixty years. I'll be the brittle-boned lady in the third rocking chair from the left, swaddled in disposable adult diapers and two cardigans. I won't remember where I am or why I'm here, but I will smell the wind and the rain and remember every sweet detail about Javier Vachon.

Maybe then I'll cry for him . . . but I won't remember why I'm crying.

I hear the restroom door creak open. Footsteps, muffled but brisk. Natalie's voice rings against the tile.

"Tracy? Open up." Her sneakered feet stop in front of my stall door.

"Natalie, you don't want to come in here." I barely recognize my own voice. I sound so . . . old.

"Open up or I crawl under the door."

My reflexes are too slow to suit her. She actually crouches, the curling ends of her hair brushing against the floor, and we peer at each other beneath the door like two wary cats.

I don't know of many people who would crawl under a locked stall door to check on me. I manage to reach up and slide the bar back. Natalie comes in and promptly sits on the floor next to me.

"You throwing up anything?" she asks, point blank and doctor-brisk.

"No."

"Have you eaten?"

I shake my head.

"Have you slept?"

Another negative shake. The lump is back in my throat, and I can't remember how to swallow.

Without another word, she puts her arms around me, and I lean my head against her shoulder.

"Tell me," she says in the softest voice I've ever heard her use, and it comes tumbling out, words and phrases, Vachon's smell, his hair, his eyes, his mouth, oh God, how I loved him, what do I do, I can't breathe, I can't cry, I miss his smile, I miss his hands, I wish, I want, let me die, oh God, give me one more night with him.

And then, finally, I cry.

❑❑❑❑❑

I took calla lilies to his grave.

It's dark, full dark, and I can see stars overhead when I tilt my head back. Those stars—they're so bright, so cool and distant, removed from all the sorrow we encounter on this planet. We go through hell. We live and love and die and grieve, and the stars shine down with perfect, never-ending clarity.

I used to wish on falling stars. I don't even see them anymore.

All at once, I remember a forgotten English lit class and how I cried over *Romeo and Juliet*. Out of nowhere, out of the wind, the words come back to me.

> "'. . . *and, when he shall die,*
> *Take him and cut him out in little stars,*
> *And he will make the face of heaven so fine*
> *That all the world will be in love with night*
> *And pay no worship to the garish sun.*'"

It is the closest I can come to an elegy for him.

"A lovely quote, my dear. A bit maudlin, but I'll allow you that."

The languid voice behind me makes my skin turn to ice. When my heart stops trip-hammering, I look over my shoulder.

He moves like a shadow, soundless and graceful, and comes to stand on the opposite side of Vachon's grave. I don't bother to stand up or even wonder why he is here. I am too tired. He hunkers down on his heels, dark coat billowing behind him.

He has eyes like ice chips, clear and cold.

"Such pretty flowers," LaCroix comments idly, reaching out one hand to stroke his long fingers over a creamy lily. "It's a shame Vachon can't enjoy them."

I open my mouth to make some stupid, smart-ass comment . . . and stop.

I've caught the scent of the wind on him. Wind and fog and rain.

And I know. I just know.

He is like Vachon. Never mind Vachon's denial when I'd asked him about LaCroix.

He must have seen the realization hit me. He smiles slightly.

"Let me tell you a story," LaCroix begins, and I feel my heartbeat dip momentarily. His voice flows over me, cool water on my skin. I feel myself shake my head and dig my fingers into the ground.

"No," I hear my voice say from a great distance. "No. Don't take this from me."

The velvet voice stops, and for the briefest of instants, I want to call back my words, to let him continue, because sweet oblivion is in his voice.

He could make me forget. He could take away the pain.

"It's all I have of him," I go on. "I don't want to forget."

"You mortals," LaCroix sighs. "You are in love with suffering." He stands up and looks at me. I can read no emotion on his face. "Enjoy your pain, Tracy Vetter."

I just stare at him. I can't believe that he would simply agree and let me go on my merry way.

When he steps across Vachon's grave to tower beside me, I know it won't be that simple.

He leans down, and I feel the touch of his cool fingertips on my cheek. His eyes are amazing, as clear as pools of still water many fathoms deep. I try to speak, to swallow, to move away, but my body is not my own.

LaCroix's lips move. "Forget me," he murmurs, and I feel his voice run into my veins, ice and fire, silk and steel.

The mourning cry of an owl wakes me. I blink and look around, realize I've nodded off by Vachon's grave. Whether I want to sleep or not, my body has other plans. I know I have to go now, leave him here to his dark sleep.

"Good night," I whisper to the quiet earth.

The owl echoes me from his unseen perch.

The wind moves through my hair, and for the briefest, sweetest of moments, I feel him, feel his breath, feel his hands in my hair.

"Vachon," I whisper to the night, to the stars. "Vachon."

end

Possible Futures

by Jamie Melody Randell

The Police Commissioner looked ravishing.

I settled my hip against the edge of her desk, and she set her paperwork aside and smiled up at me, the same little-girl smile that had snagged me so thoroughly ages ago.

"Working late again?" I asked her, half-teasing, half-scolding.

"It's the only way to work," she admonished, and pulled me down for a kiss.

The taste of her was pure rapture. . . . I'd never known the flavor of her human blood, and had always wondered what it would have been like if I'd succumbed to temptation while I'd had the chance.

"We still on for tonight?" she inquired with mock innocence, perfectly composed, while I was still recovering from the electric passion of her kiss, and her vampire blood.

"*Mais oui,*" I said absently, and she smiled again, and for a few moments I let myself be lost in her smile.

"The staff is beginning to talk," she said gravely.

I assumed a suitably sober expression. "About me?" I said, feigning ignorance.

"Well, you are kind of noticeable around here." She hesitated. "I don't suppose you'd consider maintaining a more, uh, conservative image . . .?"

"Absolutely not," I said, with just enough steel in my voice to let her know that this was not a matter we were going to pursue.

"Great. More water-cooler chatter about my heavy-metal boy toy." Tracy sighed, and changed the subject. "Have you talked with, uh . . ."

"No," I said, "and I'm not anxious to, either. Our last discussion ended . . ." and my hand raised involuntarily to rub at my shoulder; I could swear there were still splinters there, embedded in the long-healed wound ". . . badly."

"You need to talk to him," she said firmly. "Nat agrees with me."

"And that's supposed to convince me?" I wasn't feeling too kindly toward the coroner nowadays. She hadn't exactly been friendly, lately . . . and I was sure she'd left the splinters in there deliberately, just for spite.

Tracy drummed her fingers against her desktop.

"Javier," she said, not mangling the pronunciation too badly, "you won't have a moment's peace until you settle this."

"Is that a threat?" I said, surprised.

She didn't reply, but the determination in her face told me that it was.

I thought about it for a moment, and came to the conclusion that I'd rather deal with another stake in the shoulder than with Tracy's discontent.

"All right," I grumbled.

And was rewarded by another of her angelic smiles.

"Good boy," she said sweetly, and kissed me again.

One thing for certain, Tracy gives good fang.

Afterwards, I strolled down the street, allowing myself to drift in the pleasant memory of that kiss—it was far better than dwelling on the confrontation to come.

But before that, I had another visit to make.

* * * * *

She sensed me coming, of course, and was waiting for me—her eyes were wary, her body language screaming hostility.

"What do you want?" she fairly spat at me as I entered.

"For starters," I challenged her, "I want you to get the splinters out of my shoulder."

Anger was instantly sublimated by professional concern. "There shouldn't be any debris left. I cleaned the wound thoroughly."

"Well, cut it open and clean it again," I snapped at her. I'd been in pain for the last several days, and it was getting to me. Most types of pain we never feel, but what we *do* feel comes through in excruciating three-dimensional stereo, and wood produces one of the nastier allergic reactions.

Her eyes were stormy, but her hands were gentle as she probed the site of the injury. I never felt the sting of the scalpel making its bloodless incision. Despite our enmity, it was good to be close to her—it was always that way: the natural attraction between creator and fledgling. Her hands on my skin . . . Not a sexual sensation, but an intimate one, eloquent of the bond that lived between us. It relaxed me, and my guard slipped before I could stop myself.

"Are you ever going to forgive me?" I asked her, quite without meaning to.

She was still for a moment, then resumed digging through the soft tissue of my shoulder in search of wood fragments.

"I don't know if I'll ever forgive myself," she whispered.

Hard to argue with that one, though I knew I'd never understand. I'd never understood Urs, either . . . but this was different.

"This isn't my fault," I reminded her. "You asked for it!"

"Yes, I did." Her voice was low, and filled with bitterness. "My mistake."

"Really? Why is it a mistake, Nat? Because you truly regret what you've become—or because Nick doesn't like it?"

The scalpel buried in my shoulder jerked sharply, and I winced, realizing I'd gone too far. Or maybe not—when I turned to look, her face was thoughtful.

"*Touche,*" she said wryly. "You know what? I'm really not sure."

"You liked it well enough when we went flying together," I said. "You enjoyed your first taste of blood. . . ." Then let it go, because I knew perfectly well that none of it mattered. Nat was in love with Nick, and as long as he could not accept her, she couldn't accept herself.

Lousy situation, and there wasn't much I could do about it—but like it or not, I had to try.

After all, she was my creation. My child. Never mind that it hadn't exactly been my choice—I wouldn't leave her to fend for herself as my own creator had abandoned me.

As Tracy's creator had abandoned her, leaving me to care for them both.

"I'll talk to him," I told Nat, resigning myself to the necessity of it as I saw hope flicker to life in her sad eyes.

* * * * *

But when I finally found him, slumped in a back booth at the Raven, Nick was really in no condition to talk to anyone.

The array of empty bottles on the table described his current binge by vintage and alcohol content, and a quick bit of mental arithmetic left me unsurprised by his semi-consciousness. His hair was longer than mine now, badly matted and neglected. He looked like he'd stumbled in from the nearest alley.

"What d'you want?" he growled at me, nearly unintelligibly.

I seated myself at the booth, and tried not to pay attention to the smell—he'd been sleeping in dumpsters, or sewers, or something.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I asked him, too tired of the situation to bother with tact.

"You destroyed Natalie," he seethed.

"I saved her life," I countered.

"You killed her!"

"She was *dying*!"

"That doesn't make a difference. . . ."

"Doesn't it?" I shook my head. "You're making less sense than usual."

"What gives you the right to interfere?" His voice rose, and he seemed about to slam his latest bottle against the table in emphasis—looked at it, and took a long swig from it instead.

"Nick," I said patiently, "she was dying. And I was there. Should I have let her die?"

"She might have lived!" he insisted. "The paramedics were coming. . . . They could have . . ."

"She was *dying*! Last breath, last heartbeat, she was gone!" I wanted to slap some sense into him, except that it would have been too much like hitting a stray puppy—and drunk he might be, but with that amount of blood in him, he would be one hell of an opponent.

Instead, I tried to get through to him with words—never an easy task.

"Should I have let her die?" I repeated.

His face twisted, and I could tell that I'd struck a nerve.

"That's not the point!" he said weakly.

"It *is* the point." I shook my head in disbelief; he could be so dense sometimes. "She would have been six feet under right now, instead of alive and well and just waiting for you to see reason and come to her."

He considered this for a moment.

"After what I did?" he said sadly.

"Look, what's done is done. . . ." But I would never quite forgive him for it. Instead of passion and tenderness, Tracy had been brought over in fury, for the sake of vengeance. And the bond between those of the same bloodline, the bond she shared with Nick, that should have been mine.

Nick was watching me, discerning my thoughts effortlessly.

"I'm sorry," he said, but there was a false note in his voice.

"No you're not," I retorted. "You knew I'd been planning to bring Tracy across. You just wanted to deprive us of the bond you'll never have with Nat."

He hesitated, just long enough for me to know that it was true, and I kept on talking, before he could interrupt me. "But you would never have had the *cojones* to bring Nat across if I hadn't, and you wouldn't have been there in time to do it anyway. So instead of getting even, you've wronged me twice. And worst of all, you've wronged *them*. Tracy, and Natalie . . ."

Nick blinked at me and turned away.

"Leave me alone," he muttered sullenly.

"Certainly," I said, and rose. "I'll leave you alone; we'll all leave you alone. That's the way you want it, right? At this very moment, you could be with Nat, in her arms, in her bed, doing all the things you've always wanted to do with her, but instead, you're sitting in a bar getting drunk. Alone."

And I left him there, sprawled in that booth. He would either listen to me, or not. At any rate, I'd done my best.

❑❑❑❑❑

It was nearly dawn, and we were tangled together in bed, Tracy and me, when the call came from Natalie: she needed blood, lots of blood, because Nick had crashed through the living room window of her new house and was lying comatose on her floor. . . . Tracy phoned our trusted delivery service, and sent her a case of our best reserves, while I occupied myself by counting the freckles on her back.

"It'll work out," she opined, as she settled into my arms again, after the calls were done.

"And we can get on with our own lives," I agreed, pulled her close—but no matter how snugly I held her, there was a distance between us. A distance that would always be there. . . .

Tracy smiled at me, and kissed my neck, and I stopped worrying about what I couldn't have, and began to enjoy what was mine.

Three days later, when I came to visit her at the office, there were flowers on Tracy's desk. Daisies, black-eyed susans—flowers of the sun—and a little card nestled among the leaves.

"He says he's sorry," Tracy reported, with just the right amount of irony.

"Oh, I'll bet he's sorry." Nat had mentioned that Nick was currently experiencing severe bouts of guilt over his actions. But Natalie herself had been beaming; apparently, consoling Nick in his time of trauma was exactly the therapy she'd needed.

"All's well that ends well," my lady said with satisfaction, bringing me out of my memories and back to the here-and-now.

I looked at her, and wondered if she had the slightest idea how wrong she was; that the events of her rebirth, and Natalie's, would come back to haunt us all repeatedly. Things had a way of doing that, in our world. Tracy didn't know about that, yet.

Someday she'd find out, but not just now; and in the meantime, everything was back to something resembling normal.

She picked up a paper and gazed at it thoughtfully.

"What's that?" I asked.

Her grin widened into something positively wicked.

"A disciplinary suspension for Detective Knight," she said. "Hey, sometimes 'sorry' isn't good enough."

And as she signed the paper, I couldn't stop laughing.

end

And They Lived Happily Ever After

by Nancy Warlocke

LaCroix hadn't staked him. He knew that from the throbbing headache that woke him up. . . .

Wait a minute. Vampires didn't get headaches. Unless they had been shot in the head with a teflon-coated, armor-piercing, cop-killer bullet. Not LaCroix's style.

Where was Natalie?

Gone . . . *Gone!!* And so was LaCroix. Damn him!

Was it daylight outside? He should know. But he didn't. He opened the blinds for a peek. Good. Still dark.

He threw open the window and leaped through it. . . .

When he awoke the second time, his headache was even worse, and this time his chin and his knees and his elbows hurt, too. He was lying on someone's fire escape. A dozen feet below the window he had jumped from.

How long before the sun came up? How long did he have to find Natalie?

He'd have to go back into his apartment for his car keys. Apparently the whack on the head—the first one—had grounded him.

His keys were in the apartment, and the door was locked. It wasn't going to be cheap to replace that steel door. But he gave it a good shove, anyway. It didn't budge. He pulled on it with all his might. Still, it wouldn't budge.

Natalie. He had to get to her. That was his only thought.

He put all the supernatural strength he could muster behind his headlong rush at the door. . . .

The third time he regained consciousness, his head, chin, knees, elbows and shoulder hurt. In fact, his shoulder hurt a *lot*. He reached up with his good arm and found it was dislocated. Angrily, he gave the door a good kick. There was a sharp cracking sound that was not made by the door, and an instant flash of pain that told him that had *not* been a good idea. . . .

☐☐☐☐☐

He'd gone to Tracy before he'd washed the dirt off.

All a big mistake, he couldn't wait to tell her.

Once the little bitch Divia was dead, he'd started to recover. It was a lucky thing Tracy hadn't left the stake in him. That made it easier. So did a few slaps on the face, and the shock of opening his eyes to find Screed standing over him.

Usually, he was one of the handful of people in the Known Universe who understood everything Screed said, but in his dazed condition, Vachon had only been able to decipher bits and pieces. It was enough to determine two things, however:

One, Screed had risen from his grave, and two, he'd taken up residence in the storm sewers under the docks.

"But why didn't you tell me you were alive?"

"It was in me plans to do jus' that in due time, mate. Y'might say I was ok-you-pied, like . . . C'mere, Lolly, meet the V-Man."

Another vampire stepped out of the shadows. At least, Vachon sensed it was a vampire. It didn't look like one, but maybe he was stereotyping. To describe her—and it was only a pair of boobs that told him it was a she—as "homely" was a kindness. She had fangs, but no other teeth that he could see. She held a rat in each hand, but shifted one to extend her right hand to him, expecting him to kiss it.

"Chahmed Ah'm sure," she said with the fakest British accent he'd heard since seeing Kevin Costner play Robin Hood.

She was a carouche. And when she looked at Screed, Vachon swore he saw little valentines pouring from her eyes.

"We'as plannin' to invite ye over fer a proper housewarmnin' once we g'the place fixed up," Screed explained. "But, like I says, we get ok-you-pied. . . ."

Lolly and Screed gave each other a lascivious look and erupted in raucous giggles.

This was too much. Vachon sat up. He wanted to get out of there before they offered him a rat. But his head spun dizzily and Screed grabbed him.

He offered him his wrist. "Drink up, mate!"

"Uh . . . no thanks. I'll just lie here until I feel better."

"Oh, no time for that me friend!" Screed said urgently. "Lolly here tells me your little blonde constable-type acquaintance got herself whacked this eve."

"Tracy?? Is she okay?"

Screed winked. "Nope. But she will be if y'get t'her in time to do The Deed. . . ."

"Deed?"

Screed thumped the side of Vachon's head. "The *deed*, V-Man, the ol' fang-bang."

"Uh . . . yeah. I gotta go to her. . . . Just tell me where she is." He got up quickly. He had to get to Tracy. . . .

But he fell flat on his face. No food and Divia's poison had taken its toll.

When Screed offered his arm again, Vachon drank. It tasted worse than he had even dared to imagine—of rats and the garbage eaten by the rats, and the bugs that had crawled on the garbage before the rats had eaten it. No way he'd keep enough of it down to get his strength back.

"You have to come with me, Screed."

Screed agreed readily, and kissed Lolly good-bye. She stood waving at them as Screed half-carried him towards an opening in the drains, the very picture of domestic bliss.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Javier! Wake up!" It was a familiar voice, but usually, it wasn't accompanied by a kick like it was then. "*Now!*"

"Urs?"

"Yeah, Urs. Nice of you to remember."

She was mad. He'd almost rather face Divia again than Urs when she was mad at him.

"Uh, what's the matter?"

"Oh, right. Pretend you don't know."

He didn't have to pretend. He didn't even know where he was. He sat up. On a bed. Looked around. Tracy. Right next to him.

He was in bed with Tracy Vetter. Funny that should give him the nightmare he'd just had, of being staked and buried by her.

He shook his head to clear it. Dirt fell out of his hair. He looked at Tracy again, and blinked. Maybe it wasn't a nightmare.

But she looked fine. Screed had said she was dying. Had taken him to her—or rather, had carried him to her. He'd been too weak to fly. . . . Too weak to bring her across. . . .

Dead? Had he let her die?

"Tracy?" his voice choked.

Urs folded her arms across her chest. "Traaaaaccceeee," she mocked. "Sure, Javier. You're half-dead yourself, but you drag yourself to *her* side to bring *her* across and leave *me* to rot in an unmarked locker at the city morgue!"

She kicked him again.

"Morgue?"

"Yes, dammit. LaCroix's little demon spawn ripped me to shreds and Nick Knight took me to the *morgue*! No 'Here Urs, have some of my blood.' No, 'Gee Urs, maybe if you rest awhile you'll heal. . . .' Nooooo. He dumped me at the morgue where I was almost dissected by that ghoul girlfriend of his."

He got the feeling her next kick was meant for Nick, but he got it anyway.

"Urs, I was sick. I didn't know you were hurt. . . ."

"I was sick, I didn't know you were hurt," she mocked him again, and then pulled down the collar of her shirt. "Do you have any idea how much make-up it takes to cover up the fact that your head was practically twisted off?!"

"Uh . . . no."

"Well, I came to tell you we're through. I don't care if you are my master or whatever it is you think you are. I've found someone else, and he has one thing you don't have and never will, Javier. . . ." She dangled a diamond bracelet in front of him. "Money! His name is Julian and we'll be living in San Francisco. Stop by and visit if you ever scrape up enough for plane fare." And with a toss of her curls, she was gone.

Good luck, Julian, whoever you are, Vachon thought.

He turned back to Tracy. She was waking up. Still wearing the bandages from the hospital. He peeked under the one on her stomach. There was nothing there. So he'd brought her across. . . . He didn't remember it. He really didn't remember anything clearly after he'd landed on the hospital's helo deck in Screed's arms.

His senses told him Tracy was a vampire, but it wasn't the strong sense of a blood link between them. Maybe he hadn't finished the job.

There was a backpack on the chair by the bed. He recognized it as Screed's. Two bottles in the pack, one marked "V-man," one marked "Tracy."

He opened the one with his name on it. He'd need his strength if he was going to finish this properly.

Tracy stirred and opened her eyes. Golden eyes. But not quite the first hunger. . . . She'd already fed her first time. . . .

He lifted her head and offered her a drink from his bottle. She took the first few gulps eagerly and then made what was probably the ugliest face he'd ever seen. "UGH! Get that away from me!"

Vachon sniffed the blood. Warm. Reasonably fresh. No drugs. B positive. . . . He didn't get it.

Then he remembered the other bottle. He uncorked it, took a whiff and gagged. Rat.

Tracy smelled it, too. She grabbed it from him and downed it in one greedy gulp.

Then she smiled up at him, her eyes gold, pretty little fangs extended, sharp, inviting. . . .

Okay, they were dripping with rat blood, but he could overlook that with effort.

He took her in his arms and whispered, "Thank you, Screed."

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick limped down the hospital hallway to Natalie's room with LaCroix supporting him.

Natalie's eyes were sunken sockets, and she was whiter than the bedsheets. It had taken seventeen units of whole blood to bring her just this far back from the brink of death.

But she opened her eyes when he spoke her name and smiled at him. She was alive, and she would stay that way.

"How did I get here?" she whispered.

Nick couldn't answer that. He'd been unconscious at the time.

He looked at LaCroix, whose lips turned up in the slightest hint of a smile.

Nick didn't know what to say. He'd already told LaCroix he was his closest friend, but at the time, he didn't think he'd have to face him again and really mean it.

It wasn't until he limped around the bed to kiss Natalie that LaCroix finally spoke. "I think perhaps you should have your foot X-rayed, Nicholas. Kicking doors can have unfortunate consequences for those who lack the physical constitution to win the contest."

Nick sat down on a chair beside the bed, and painfully pulled off his shoe and his sock to reveal swollen toes as purple as grapes.

"LaCroix. . . ."

"Mortality is not without its price, Nicholas."

❑❑❑❑❑

One Month Later

LaCroix watched the festivities from his CERK booth tucked away at the Raven. His beloved children of the night. . . . Well, foster children of the night. . . . Okay, some of them were children of the day, too. . . .

They celebrated the fact that the glamorous and beautiful Janette was once again among them. She had returned to reclaim control of the Raven with her new consort, a darkly handsome vampire who didn't really seem to have a name. He seemed nice enough, though, and Janette had *asked* LaCroix to sell the Raven back to her, not demanded it. He'd never gotten into running the place, anyway, and the words of that evil fruit of his loins—*innkeeper*!—were still stinging his conscience when he agreed to let her have it back.

Everyone he held dear was here except for Vachon and Tracy. Tracy was busy at her own club down by the docks.

She had proven to have quite a business head on her, and had taken the opportunity to create a haven for those of the Undead who appreciated a more alternative un-lifestyle.

All right, the place was a carouche bar. But Tracy, at least, gave it some class.

Vachon had become a regular at both places. LaCroix was beginning to worry about him. The Spaniard definitely had too much time on his hands, but he'd use that problem to solve another. . . .

Nicholas had returned to the police force and was now off limited duty, his unintentionally inflicted injuries having since healed.

Of course, he was mortal now. LaCroix wasn't comfortable with that. No, not at all.

The ideal situation would have been to have Tracy remain his partner, which would have given LaCroix peace of mind. But, alas, that wasn't possible, because everyone thought Tracy was dead, except for her parents who had been successfully whammied into thinking she'd run away to the States with her slacker boyfriend. No one dared speak her name around her father—the man became irrational if they did—so the subject never came up.

The night was young, but Nicholas, duty-bound as ever, came in to excuse himself. He and Natalie had to go to work.

"Is he ready?" he asked.

"He has not even arrived to the best of my knowledge," LaCroix said.

"Do you really think this is going to work, LaCroix? You know how he is. And I can't wait all night for him."

As if on cue, Vachon sauntered into the Raven. Everyone would have turned to stare if they'd known it was him, but nobody did. Clean-shaven, with his hair cut and combed, and wearing a shirt and tie, he was not the Javier Vachon they all knew. He was barely the Javier Vachon that Javier Vachon knew.

He was not a happy vampire. He looked at LaCroix, leather jacket slung over his shoulder. "I . . . *hate* . . . *this*," he hissed.

LaCroix dismissed him with a wave. "Well, get over it. It's time you had a job."

Vachon stared stubbornly. "I won't do it."

But the words were still leaving his mouth when two pairs of vampire hands swung him around to face them. Janette and her new companion.

Janette was stunning in a low-cut red velvet gown that clung to her every curve. But it was her boyfriend Vachon stared at, his mouth going slack and his eyes opening even wider than usual.

"You *will* do it!" Janette's friend commanded.

"*You!* You're supposed to be dead!"

"Really, my brother, did you think I'd hold on to a bomb while it blew me to pieces? How dumb do you think I am?"

Vachon groaned. He guessed he'd always known deep down that The Inca wasn't dead. But he'd been hoping. . . .

"Besides," The Inca told him. "It's time you did as our master commanded us."

Vachon felt a smirk coming on, but LaCroix cut that short.

"And remember," he warned, "*nothing* happens to Nicholas. . . ."

And Janette grabbed his face and pulled him towards her. "Nothing . . ." she hissed.

"Well, that does it then," Nick said, clapping his hand together cheerfully. Thanks to a few well-placed whammies and a little help from Aristotle, Nick handed a shiny new Metro Police ID to his new partner, Detective J.D. Vachon.

* * *

LaCroix watched them go. He still felt a bond with his Nicholas, his now-mortal child who would grow old and die before his eyes, he hoped in that order.

Besides, divorce rates were high, police work was dangerous. . . . He could still get Nick back. . . .

* * *

At the precinct headquarters, Vachon did a bad job of pretending to be interested in meeting the people he'd be working with. . . . He hated cops. He hated looking like a damn yuppy. He hated the way the holster he had to wear itched. He hated work. He'd be the first to admit that.

"That boy has an attitude," Captain Reese told Nick when he thought Vachon was out of earshot. "But he has a good record."

"And I'll teach him everything he needs to know."

When Nick joined him, Vachon was staring at a display case that, among other things, contained the photographs of the precinct's fallen comrades. Nick's last two partners were on that wall, which was not something Vachon considered a good omen, even if one of them was really still alive. . . .

Nick looked sad. Vachon wanted to say something to him, but the words caught in his throat when he got a good look at the photographs. He wasn't choked with emotion like Nick was, but he felt choked, nonetheless.

He recognized the picture between Schanke and Tracy. He hadn't known until that moment that the woman's name was Amanda Cohen, but he remembered her.

After the plane crash. Waking up, burned, injured, crazy with hunger. . . .

As soon as he was sure no one could see him, he'd grabbed the first body he'd found with any sign of life in it.

He'd sunk his fangs into this Amanda Cohen.

And she'd slugged him in the jaw and bitten him back. Her fangs were bigger than his. A lot bigger. He shuddered at the memory. He'd come very close to being eaten alive.

He wondered if anyone had known she was a werewolf?

Nick turned away from the pictures and clapped him on the back. "Ready to go to work?"

Vachon wanted to punch him, but he couldn't do it in front of those pictures. Most of those cops were human and really were dead. Instead, he sighed. Maybe The Inca was right. Damn him, anyway.

* * *

4 Months Later

The wedding shower was going to be at Nick's place because it was bigger than Natalie's and it was safe for the vampires who were invited. . . . Janette, Lolly, Tracy, even Urs, who had made up with Vachon now that she could parade her wealth before Tracy. Natalie's mortal friends would be there, too, including Grace, who was the only one besides LaCroix who knew why the wedding plans were being rushed.

The term "morning sickness" was a misnomer if you worked nights. Natalie hoped she'd get through the midnight party without an attack.

She was about to push Nick out the door, explaining that men were just not wanted at these things, when someone knocked.

"I'll get it!" he said, wondering which guest had arrived early.

But it wasn't a guest for the wedding shower. . . . It was a tall, athletic man with long, black hair drawn back in a ponytail. He didn't seem to know what he should say, and was thinking about it when another, rounder face peered from behind him.

Nick's jaw hit the floor. For a fleeting instant, he wanted his immortality back, because he was certain he was having a heart attack when he recognized the other man.

"Schank . . ." he gasped. "Schanke???"

The dark-haired man with Schanke stepped forward and extended his hand.

"Hi. I'm Duncan MacLeod, and there's something we need to tell you. . . ."

AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER . . .

Except for a certain television producer, whose last name rhymes with a major hotel chain, and his cohorts, who were later brought before LaCroix and charged with the most heinous of crimes against fictional vampires and those who love them.

LaCroix had contacted Urs, whose new consort, Julian Luna, had ties to the entertainment industry's most sordid underside.

Together, they had conceived a punishment for these evil conspirators so horrible that it had led Nick to comment, "No LaCroix, you can't. Even they don't deserve that!"

But LaCroix had only smirked and told him, "It's bad enough that you are mortal, Nicholas. Don't flaunt your new-found morality in my face, too."

And with that, he had consigned those guilty of the worst series finale in the history of television except, perhaps, for *Quantum Leap*, to languish for the remainder of eternity writing scripts for Aaron Spelling Productions and creating series for the USA Network.

NOBODY DIES. DENY EVERYTHING.

(apologies to the Vaqueras for the haircut)

end

Waiting for the Sun

by Gabriel McFarlane

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.
(Roughly, "The more things change, the more they stay the same.")

Prologue

"Love me two times,
'cause I'm going away . . ."

May, 1996

"I don't think I can do this—"

It seemed like such a great idea only half an hour ago when he'd put his hands on her breasts and she made that soft little sighing sound that told him she'd been hoping—for the past hour—that he'd do exactly that. It seemed like the obvious and perfect thing to do just a moment ago when she'd been tugging at his belt, his jeans; when he was forced to decide which he wanted more, to keep on kissing her or to pull her sweater over her head.

But now that they were in his bed, clothes strewn all down the stairway and through the church like a trail of breadcrumbs, inhibitions lost somewhere between four in the morning and a friendly kiss goodbye that got tongue-twisted and lasted too long and felt *way* too good for just friends . . .

. . . he suddenly wasn't so sure.

Breathless, he eased himself out of her arms, out from under her long leg hooked round his hips to hold him close. "I don't know. . . ."

"Are you scared?" she asked. In the soft bedside light she was pink and golden, looking so completely and utterly trusting, it made him light-headed.

". . . yeah . . ." he admitted, laughing a little. He wasn't the one who was supposed to be afraid. "Aren't you?"

"No," she whispered, pulling him down to kiss her again.

She *was* scared; he could taste it in her mouth, on her tongue, that faint edge of tartness in the creamy apricot. The realization prickled through him like the soft scrape of nails down his back and, when he broke the kiss, moving away again (not too far away) he saw the way her eyes widened. He could see himself in them, his own eyes starting to lose color, a bright golden halo ringing the pupil.

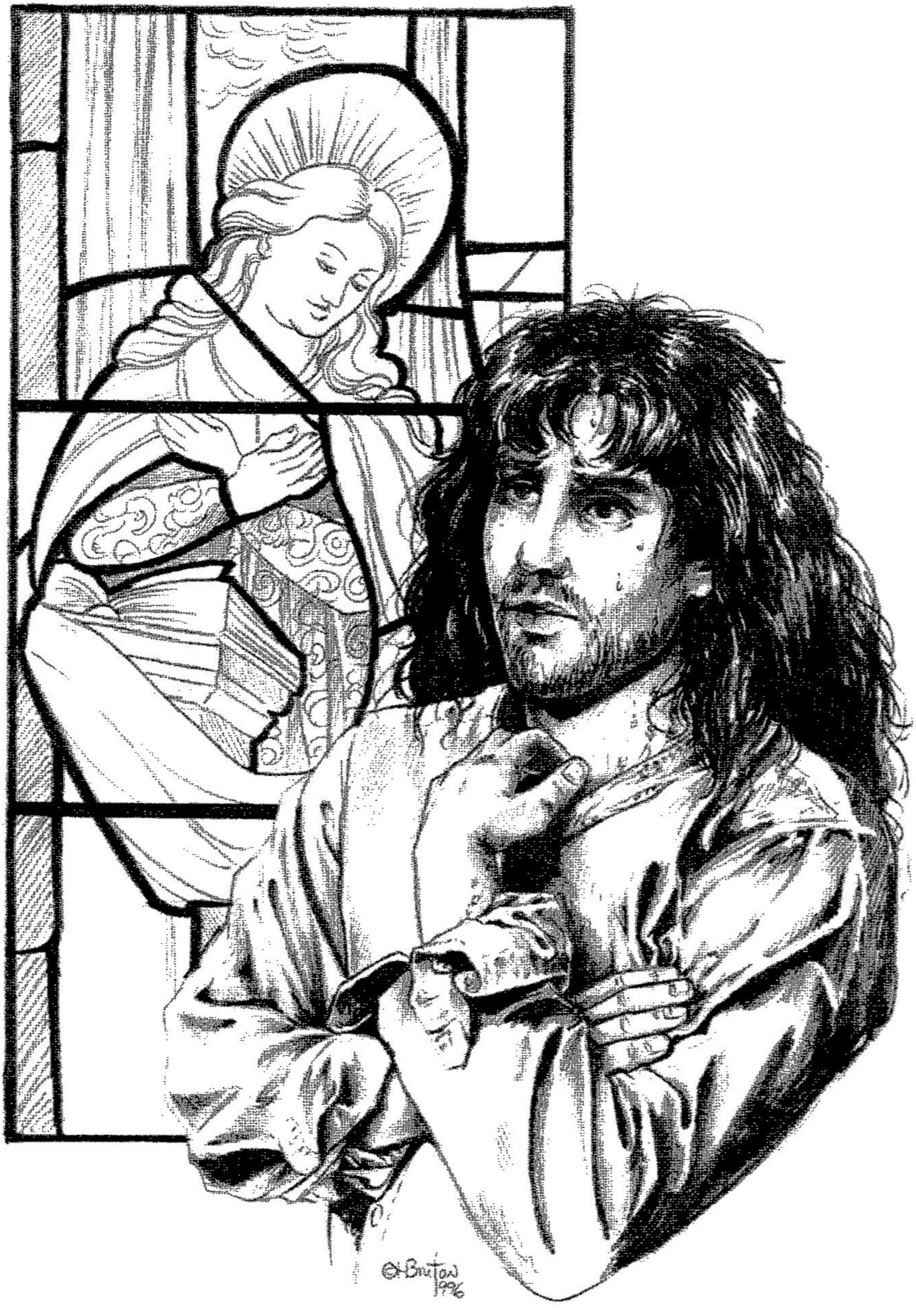
"Touch me again—" She caught one of his hands and guided it down, couldn't stop a moan as his fingers slid over her belly. The apricot scent was heavy, ripe, as if her entire body was a soft, lush fruit. He could feel his canines pushing down; closed his eyes a moment, willing himself to slow down, slow down . . .!

"Here?" He brushed the inside of her thigh with his knuckles, riffling over her damp hair, coming so close it made her arch her hips to try to reach his teasing fingers. "Here?"

She ran her hands up his arms, over his shoulders, down over his chest, rubbing her palms on the crisp dark hair. Tweaked one of his nipples, making him jump.

"Oh, so you're *ticklish*?" she said with a wicked grin. One arm slid round his waist, pulling him down, the other reaching for a tender spot low on his belly that did a lot more than make him jump.

The hard length of his erection was bumping between them, a foreign body they'd both been pretending to ignore. Impossible now, with hands and bellies and chests squeezed together in a sweaty tangle. He made a low sound, not a human sound, and she stopped tickling and fighting, holding her breath as she watched his face, his eyes.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"You *sure* you want to do this?" he said, trying to joke. The points of his canines must be showing now behind his upper lip. Her heart was like a trip hammer.

Wriggling a little beneath him, she opened her thighs, tipped her hips upward. Eyes never leaving his. Not saying a word.

He took a deep breath, shivering a little. Meeting soft resistance at first, hot, moist, pushing a little, just a little . . . then finding the hidden slick wet and sliding inside, deep inside, making them both gasp. Neither moving, letting the first rush slowly recede. He wasn't sure if he *could* move without immediately sinking his teeth into her throat. Paralyzed, he did nothing.

"You okay?" she murmured. When he didn't reply she asked, "You want to stop?"

He blinked, wondering how long he'd been lying there frozen. Shook his head. Then a sudden doubt: "Do you?"

"Are you *kidding*?"

They were at an impasse. Then she made a hesitant suggestion: "Can you . . . roll over?"

"You mean without . . .?" He considered; tucked an arm under her to hold her close, extended his leg, and rolled onto his back. Easy. All he had to do was remember how to breathe. "Now what?"

"Now you trust me." She crossed her arms, propping herself on his chest. Ran a curious finger through the black hair with an odd smile. "Always wanted to do that . . ."

Trust her? This was all backwards. He was the one who said "Trust me," such a treacherous lie, in the split second before his teeth broke the skin. All along her throat, her arms, he could see the heat-lines, could hear her blood calling. "Now what?" he asked again.

"Now you do nothing," she said. Her face was flushed, glorious pink that ran all the way down to her breasts. "Let me . . ."

First one leg, slowly, slowly, then the other. . . . She squeezed gently with her thighs as she sat up, letting her full weight rest on him momentarily before she began to slowly move. He groaned again, knowing he'd be lucky to last another few seconds, no more, before he pulled her down and tore into her beating, beautiful throat.

"Aren't you afraid—I'll hurt you?"

"No. Why should I be?"

Hard to reply when she moved like that, so slowly, so velvet smooth and wet. Delicious heat, swelling, building . . . She reached down to cup his face in her hands, traced his lips, his teeth, with her thumbs. "You'll never hurt me," she promised him.

1

"Five to one, baby . . .
one in five . . .
no one here gets out alive . . ."

October, 1996

He shook his head, trying to make his ears stop ringing. Somebody was yelling at him over the thudding of the bass, the drums. "—your cue, man!"

Blinking down at the guitar in his hands, he mechanically began to play. No idea how long he'd been there, whether he'd been on auto pilot for two minutes or two hours. The fingers on his left hand were starting to cramp up; he decided they must have been practicing most of the night. A glance at one of the tall, narrow windows told him it wouldn't be long before the sky started to lighten. An hour, maybe less, before the sun came up.

She'd be here then. The thought made him so anxious, he flubbed the changes leading into the chorus.

The singer kicked over the mike stand in disgust. "For Chrissake, how many times *is* that? Six? Seven? I've had it, Cowboy! You'd better have your act together tomorrow night, or you can forget the Elmo gig!"

Guess that meant practice was over, he thought, flipping the switch on the amp. "Sorry."

"Yeah, right! Sorry, my ass! Come on, Beau, Randy, let's go—"

While the singer and drummer made their noisy exit, the bass player hung back a bit. Shuffling his feet and clearing his throat with exaggerated effort. "Hey, man . . ."

He'd just stretched out on the old green sofa, hoping to close his eyes a few minutes before she got there. Knowing it was pointless: just thinking about her made his heart quicken painfully, eager and hungry. "Yeah, Randy?"

The young man glanced round, looking uncomfortable. "No offense, Cowboy, but . . ." Beneath his thin reddish beard, he blushed, making him look far younger than his twenty-two years. "She's no good for you, man. Can't you see that? Ever since she started comin' around, your playing's gone all to hell. I know we're not the greatest band in the city, but you could really *do* something, you know? I hate to see you goin' to waste."

"To waste?" He had to laugh at the bassist's melodrama. "I wouldn't say I'm—" He caught sight of her coming up the stairs, and whatever he was about to say to Randy blew away like smoke. The band, the music, the cavernous warehouse, the coming dawn—everything else faded, dark and dull in comparison to the promise in her golden smile.

He heard the bass player's muttered "See you tomorrow night, then," but didn't acknowledge it.

She was there, and he couldn't think of anything else.

Anything at all.

❑❑❑❑❑

Things had been going along just fine in Tracy's life. New job, great new partner, new man in her life—

But it always kind of broke down at that point. She'd known from the beginning it was going to be hard; she'd just had no idea how bad it could really get. If she hadn't had Nick supporting her like a combination big brother and brick wall, she probably would have just locked herself in her tidy little apartment, cleaned it until there was nothing left to clean, then curled up in a corner, and died.

No, that was an exaggeration. She was too much of an obsessive-compulsive to lock herself away and disappear: she would have thrown herself into her work even more so than she was doing now, turning herself into the stereotypical hard-nosed, married to the badge, sexless career cop, immune to emotion.

On nights like this one, called down to take over a case day shift was passing on, she wished she was that cold and heartless cardboard cutout. One look at the savaged body, and she turned away with a gasp.

Lewis, one of the day shift detectives, couldn't resist a jab: "If you're going to toss your cookies again, Vetter, make sure you miss my shoes, eh?"

She kept her lips pressed together, determined not to make another sound. Then she crouched down beside the body and pointed the white beam of her flashlight at the dead girl's face. You can do this, she told herself. Just don't feel it. Don't let it in.

Young, slim, blonde . . . violated, mutilated, dumped. Tracy could almost smell the man's rage lingering in the dark doorway. "Definitely one of ours, Nick," she sighed, getting to her feet. "That makes three with the same M.O."

Lewis just couldn't resist another poke, this one really crossing the line: "Geez, Vetter, you're a dead ringer for this broad! Better watch out or you might be number four!"

"Hey, now . . .!" Joe Reese rumbled. "There's no call for that, Lewis!" Even Barnowski, who really liked to take potshots, looked embarrassed. Lewis just smirked.

And Nick hit him.

He moved so suddenly, there wasn't time for anybody to react, or try and stop him. There was a wet shriek, and Lewis went down like he'd been shot, blood gushing from his nose.

It was the first time Tracy'd seen Nick lose control like that, really lose it. It scared her—not because she was afraid he'd do it again, but because she knew this case was tearing him up inside. And she didn't know why. It was more than the victims looking like her. That upset him; this . . . was something worse.

"It's okay, Nick," she tried to tell him later, when he was pushing the Caddy too fast down the Parkway, face grim, eyes locked on the road. Seeing nothing. Whipping past other cars like they were stationary objects placed there for the sole purpose of getting in his way. "Nick, come on . . . It's crime scene BS, you know that. We all say stupid things, make bad jokes. He didn't mean it."

Nick didn't reply. Just gripped the wheel even tighter, his already-white knuckles like bone. Face like death, jaw clenched, little muscle jumping on his temple.

"Nick . . ." she tried again, but it was no use and she knew it. There was crime scene BS, and then there was the kind of bad-taste-in-your-mouth comment Lewis had made. The worst part was, Lewis was right. There was a striking—and horribly unsettling—resemblance between Tracy and the dead girls.

"Do you know what I think?"

Nick's flat, breathless words made her swivel to look at him. "About what?"

As he turned to her, eyes still hot and angry, looking like he had when they'd pulled him off Lewis, she suddenly knew. "No—" She shook her head. "There's no way. No way at all."

"You just won't admit it!" he insisted. "As soon as I saw the first one, I knew. You did too, Tracy."

"You're wrong." She turned her gaze to the road, refusing to listen to him.

"Tracy, I know losing him was hard on you, but you can't go on ignoring the truth. The sooner you—"

"The truth!" Her seatbelt locked, she spun so abruptly to face him. "I *know* him, Nick! He couldn't do something like that any more than you could!"

"Just promise me—" He stopped suddenly, his expression betraying him. He was angry, but he was close to tears at the same time. "Tracy, please—promise me if he phones you, if he tries to see you—that you'll call me first, call somebody, anybody! Don't risk your life over what happened in the past.

Please."

"Nick—"

"Promise me," he repeated. "If I'm wrong, then nothing changes. You'll still be alive. But if I'm right—I don't want to lose another partner, Tracy. I'd never forgive myself."

He released his death grip on the steering wheel, offering his hand. "Tracy, I'm begging you . . ."

What else could she do? "Okay." She nodded. Squeezing his hand tight. "Okay. I promise."

☐☐☐☐☐

I didn't want this! Why didn't you tell me, if you knew? Why didn't you warn me?

Nick shuddered in his sleep, trying to reply. His tongue felt like a slug in his mouth, his thoughts and words completely jumbled and confused.

Natalie, her voice thick with sleep, stirred. "Nick?"

He didn't hear her. His head was ringing with the anguished cry, over and over again: *I don't want it! Oh, God, I don't want it!*

"—sorry—" he groaned. "I'm sorry!"

"Nick!" Natalie flipped on the bedside light. "Nick, it's just a dream—wake up!"

Nick thrashed out of sleep with a gasp, his heart pounding, throat stone dry. For a moment he didn't recognize his loft, his bedroom, even Natalie's face. She wisely kept her distance, not touching him until he'd gulped down a few breaths, let himself sink back to the sweat-soaked sheets. "You were dreaming," she told him. "Are you okay? Do you want me to get you some water? I've got to get up anyway."

He nodded, not trusting his voice. As she slipped out of bed, he closed his eyes, wishing he could forget. Wishing they could all forget.

No one, not Nick, not Natalie or anyone else had suspected. Tracy, for all her open-book appearance, knew how to keep a secret. And so, apparently, did Vachon. Maybe they'd suspected just how much of a protest Nick would put up; maybe they were just shy. Whatever the reason, by the time Tracy let her guard slip, unable to wear turtlenecks in the brutal humidity of July, and Nick finally saw the bites on her neck—layers and layers of bruises, some old and yellow-green and fading, some fresh and purple-red, each and every one punctuated by two small, scabbed-over wounds—it was too late to do anything.

He blamed himself: if he hadn't been so tied up with Janette, with all the twists and turns and revelations, with the should-haves and could-haves and if-onlys, he would have seen what was happening, could have done something—!

"What could you have done?" Natalie asked when he told her about the dream. "Come on, Nick! Nothing would have stopped them! Quit beating yourself up over it—what's done is done, and it can't be undone."

The plea echoed in his head, lost, wild: *I didn't want this!*

"No—as soon as I knew, I should have said something, given them the choice—"

She covered his mouth with her hand. "No more." With a groan, she reached for the light, turned it off again. "I have to do that girl first thing, and I'd rather do it with a few hours of sleep under my—Oh!"

She groped for his hand in the dark, placed it low on her belly. "I can never feel anything," he said after a moment of waiting. "Every time you tell me—"

There was a sudden, vigorous motion beneath his palm, and Natalie laughed out loud. "Don't tell me you couldn't feel that!"

"He's kicking up a storm!"

"*She* is," Natalie teased, the smile in her voice suddenly stretched by a yawn. "Now if the two of you would let me get some sleep . . .?"

Nick obligingly curled round her, his chest against her back. He kept his hand on her belly, waiting, hoping, but only one more ghost movement from the baby pushed against his hand before sliding away, still again. Natalie let out a sigh, drifting back into sleep. Nick tried to focus on the soft shampoo smell of her hair, but the dream lingered, dark and disturbing, full of bleak regret.

2

"You know the day destroys the night;
night divides the day . . ."

Keeping the chain of evidence intact required the investigating detective to follow the body: from the crime scene to the morgue; through postmortem fingerprinting, photos, identification; through the autopsy, witnessing everything the medical examiner did; all the way to the toe tag and the cold storage drawer. It never used to bother Nick, but when he became mortal again, he discovered just how painful and emotionally draining it was. He understood now why Schanke had hated it so desperately, and had gone through such wild contortions to hand the task over to Nick. In all his years on the force, Schanke had never been able to distance himself. Too human, Nick thought sadly.

Tracy, on the other hand, either didn't let anyone see what she was feeling, or she'd managed to put up a shield between her heart and her head over the past year since they'd partnered up. Nick almost missed the ingenuous girl she'd been when they first met. She was a better cop, granted; but she was a different person altogether now.

And not without reason. She'd weathered some uncommonly tough times, going from a pampered and sheltered princess to a streetwise detective able to handle the ugliest cases—not to mention the whole thing with Vachon, having her entire take on reality turned end for end—all in the span of a single year. What she'd been through would have broken half the men Nick knew; he wasn't surprised that she was a little distant these days.

"You ready for this?" Natalie asked quietly.

"Yeah, let's do it," Nick said grimly. Tracy just nodded, silent.

"It's getting worse," Natalie commented, foot still off the record pedal. "The first one was bad, but it still fit most of the 'organized killer' pattern. But what he's doing now—" She shook her head, mixed emotion on her face. "His actions are completely disorganized, out of control. You have to stop him, and soon—he's in too deep to stop himself. The next one's going to be in broad daylight somewhere, a hundred people watching, and he'll be so out of it, he won't notice or even care."

" 'Organized'? 'Disorganized'?" Nick tried to joke. "What's all this? You sound like you've been studying the rapist classifications in Geberth, Nat!"

Natalie set down the scalpel she'd picked up, and started pointing out wounds: "How many do you see here? Twenty? Thirty? The cut to the throat is the killing blow—all the rest are *post*-mortem, Nick! And the bites—!"

"Bites?" Nick glanced at Tracy, but she looked as surprised as he felt. They must have both missed seeing them at the crime scene; that wasn't surprising, with the amount of blood spilled. At Natalie's beckon, they went round to the other side of the table to get a close look.

"Oh, my God . . .!" Tracy breathed, the shield dropping for a second.

The girl must have had a dozen bites—some around the throat area, some on her breast, one on her arm. "That one's a defense wound," Natalie said, pointing to one. "She got it trying to fend him off. But she was dead for the rest." She hesitated a moment, examining the circular bruises, then amended, "Well, most of them are post. But not all. You see what I mean now? He's not doing this for fun, like you thought at first. He's out of control."

Nick had to agree: the kind of damage the killer was inflicting was off the scale. The only kind of massive overkill he'd seen that even remotely resembled this was a passion/rage murder where a gay man had stabbed his unfaithful lover eighty-seven times with a pair of scissors. It was the same in this case: as if the emotion was so deep, so overwhelming, it took on a murderous persona of its own. Early on in this investigation, some idiot, probably Lewis, had commented: "At least she wasn't raped."

Natalie, true to form, had snapped, "You don't consider the half a dozen or so stab wounds in the genital area 'penetration'? Oh, this is rape, all right—just a little nastier variety than you're used to!"

It was sexual; it was violent. Nick couldn't see it as anything but a vampire-related killing. Even the bite-marks, fangs or not, pointed to a vampire. A severely disturbed and dangerous one. Out of control, like Natalie said. And he was certain he knew exactly who it was, and why. "I still think it's—"

The look Tracy shot him was so raw, so furious, he couldn't finish. Natalie glanced up, looked at Nick, at Tracy, and shook her head. Nick had told her his theory; like Tracy, she didn't agree.

"I think Nick's right about one thing," Natalie said, trying to keep her tone diplomatic, soothing. "You should really watch your back, Tracy. If this guy is going after a type, you fit the bill perfectly. The first one wasn't as tall or blonde as you, the second one was a little heavier, but this one . . . it's getting scary."

"Maybe I should just move out of town, head out west to Calgary or even Vancouver!" Tracy said bitterly. "Is that the way to handle it? Run away?"

Nick held his tongue. As far as he was concerned, running away wouldn't do any good.

"I just mean be careful," Natalie said. "Honestly, I think the killer's so close to self-destructing, we shouldn't have to worry."

"It's not him," Tracy said softly, staring down at the floor.

"I didn't say—"

Her face was stark and pale, twisted. "It's not Vachon! He *couldn't* do this! Don't you understand that? I know him better than anyone—anyone!—and he couldn't do it!"

Nick started to reach for her, to take her hand, put his arm around her shoulder, anything that would tell her how much he wanted his theory to be wrong. But she was already gone.

As the swinging doors batted back and forth, back and forth, Natalie turned to Nick. "You're still convinced it's Vachon?"

Nick covered his face with his hands a moment, wondering how he had forgotten how all-encompassing a headache could be. Then he pushed his hands through his hair. "I suspected it from the very beginning, as soon as I saw the first girl." He sighed. "Now—looking at this one . . . I can't think of anything else. If it's not Vachon, why do the girls look so much like Tracy? Is there somebody in her past who's after her? Why now, after so long? Why this kind of wholesale slash and tear? Why focus on the throat? Why the bites? God—! I don't know. I don't know."

"You've gone through the records."

He nodded. "Yeah. Everything she's ever worked on, pretty well anyone she's ever known who's in the system, and then the ones who aren't—guys from her high school, junior high, parents' and brothers' friends, old boyfriends, guys she worked with in her previous jobs, old paperboys, neighbors—"

"Don't you think you're carrying this 'no stone unturned' thing a little too far?"

He threw up his hands in defeat. "I'm trying to eliminate all the other possibilities! And I have—that's why I know it's Vachon. There's no one else it *can* be."

"I guess it would be a stupid question if I asked if you'd looked for him."

"No, not stupid. It was the first thing I did. If he's still in Toronto, he's using a different name, maybe changed his appearance, who knows? I didn't tell Tracy, but I convinced Joe Reese to put a couple men on it, keep an eye out for him. John Doe, of course."

"And . . .?" Natalie was working as he talked, stepping on the foot pedal to make quiet notations into the overhead microphone: "Exposing the internal organs . . ."

"Nothing. He's disappeared. I don't know whether he had any help from the vampire community or not, but if he did, it'll be impossible to—Nat? What is it?"

She looked like she'd been struck across the face, her cheeks going pale, then suddenly flushing. "This—" she said, her voice choked as she lifted the knife from deep in the body cavity, buried deep in the dead girl's uterus. "I think I found your murder weapon—"

It was no wonder she hadn't found the knife at the scene, even while she was checking for seminal fluid—there'd been none, just blood and too many wounds to count. Natalie stepped back from the table, blinking rapidly, and didn't argue when Nick rolled her chair over and gave her a gentle push to make her sit down.

"I took a saliva wash of the bites at the scene, and had a casting done," she said shakily, "but I need something to compare it to. I can't do a DNA comparison without a suspect—Oh, God. J.D. Valdez."

Of course the evidence was still somewhere in the files. Even vampires left blood and tissue when a plane exploded. "The hand," she remembered, already at the computer, punching at the keys. "We had a hand that didn't match up, and then it disappeared. It had to be Vachon—'J.D. Valdez.' You've got to find him, Nick, no matter what it . . ."

When she looked up, Nick could see how hard it was for her to ask: "Nick, if it *is* Vachon—and I hope to God you're wrong!—if it is, there's only one person who can find him. And you know I'd never ask if I thought there was any other way to do this, any way at all."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Nick almost laughed. "Nat, listen to yourself! You want me to go to *Lacroix* for help, after what we've done?"

"If you've eliminated all the other possible suspects, there's nobody left. We can't let this happen again, Nick. Not to Tracy, not to any woman. Please. There's no other way."

3

"People are strange when you're a stranger . . .
faces look ugly when you're alone"

It was the first time he'd been in the Raven as a mortal. The first thing that struck him was the predatory way so many of the clientele looked at him, eyes bright and nostrils flaring, picking up the scent of a possible meal. It was unpleasant, to say the least.

The second thing that struck him was that he had no sense of Lacroix, not even when the hand closed on his shoulder. It could have been anyone behind him, a man, a woman, a friend or stranger.

"Nicholas."

Nick closed his eyes momentarily, wishing he could put off turning. Forcing a smile he didn't feel, he faced his old nemesis. "Lacroix."

How could anyone not see that this man—this thing masquerading as a man—was not entirely human? Was it because he'd once been the same? Lacroix seemed to shine, his eyes too blue, his powdered white skin like translucent china. The bizarre touches of makeup only made him look more unreal—an effect he no doubt cultivated for amusement. Nick had to resist the urge to reach out and touch his waxy skin.

The old vampire smiled—*Thank God,* Nick thought, *he's going to play "charming"*—and indicated a table away from the busier part of the bar. "Shall I have Victor bring us a little something?"

"Ah, no thanks," Nick shook his head, sliding into the chair and pulling file folders out of the briefcase he carried.

Lacroix regarded the folders with a sniff. "I know you too well to presume this might be a social call," he said after a moment. "How odd that I cannot feel you anymore, Nicholas. Odd, and very sad."

A year ago, Nick would have tossed off some throwaway line, something witty and cutting. "I was thinking the same thing when I came in," he admitted. "Lacroix, I'm . . . I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" His perfectly made-up eyes widened in mock surprise. "Why, Nicholas, whatever for?"

"For not being able to be who you wanted me to be. A son, a friend, a companion. We both made the wrong choice—and paid for it for 800 years."

"I don't make wrong choices." The smile was gone and, with it, the charm.

"Well, I did," Nick replied. "And however you want to take it, I'm sorry."

Lacroix made a soft little noise, almost a snort. With an imperious click of his fingers, he summoned a waiter who came with an already-uncorked bottle and two glasses. As he started to set them down, Lacroix snatched the second glass off the tray with a snarl, crushing it in his hand to sparkling dust. "Idiot!"

The waiter gaped at Nick, doing the nostril-flaring routine. "Oh! I'm sorry—!"

Another snarl from Lacroix made him back away in a hurry, still gabbling apologies. Nick was beginning to guess just how angry Lacroix really was, and to forestall any further raking over the past, he opened one of the files he'd brought along. "I need your help," he said. "I know there's no reason you should give it, no reason you'd even want to help me—but I'm asking anyway. There's no one else I could come to with this."

Lacroix eyed the closed file folders with obvious distaste. "Why should I?" he challenged. "Does this have anything to do with our—" He corrected himself pointedly. "—with *my* community? Is there a danger to my people?"

Nick selected two or three of the worst photographs from the first folder and laid them out without a word. Then three or four more from the second folder.

Lacroix watched impatiently, sighing. "Nicholas, I fail to see how this concerns me." He poured himself a glass of the thick, dark liquid, sniffing it appreciatively. "Ah, October 1996: a vintage month . . . !"

Nick was surprised the smell of the blood was so sharp and distinctive. Suppressing a shudder, he pulled out the last photos, placing the closeup of the dead girl's face directly under Lacroix's nose. Then he sat back, waiting.

The three-stage reaction was instantaneous: a dismissing glance, an abrupt double take, and then a frown. He raised his eyes to meet Nick's, one penciled eyebrow cocked in question. "You *do* appear to have a problem, Nicholas," he said softly. "They're very like your pretty little partner." Another glance at the photos. "Very like . . ."

Nick waited, letting the photos do their work. It was impossible for anyone to look at them without being drawn in. Even a vampire. "What is it you want?" Lacroix asked finally. "I can't tell you anything about these crimes. I don't know anyone, vampire or mortal, who'd commit such atrocities."

"Don't be so sure about that until you hear the rest," Nick warned him. "I think you do know him. Natalie and Tracy disagree with me, but I think it's Vachon."

Lacroix set the wineglass down with a sharp click, genuinely shocked. "The Spaniard? The one who was so taken with your little partner? But, Nicholas . . .!" He swept a hand over the photos. "Anyone could see how he felt about her! Besides—" He pushed one of the photos toward Nick, the closeup of the bite mark on the girl's throat. "In the event you've forgotten, Nicholas, my kind has rather a distinctive calling card . . . this man doesn't. He's not a vampire."

"No, but he used to be."

"He—?" With a feral sound, Lacroix slowly straightened in the chair. When he could speak, it was with an ugly growl in his voice: "Nicholas, Nicholas, Nicholas . . .! What have you let loose amongst us, you and your cursed quest for mortality!"

Nick smiled. "Sorry, Lacroix, you can't blame this one on me. They did it all on their own, without even knowing it. He was probably well on his way to becoming mortal even before Janette showed up."

Lacroix was aghast. "He didn't know?"

"And by the time I did, it was too late. He came to me—" For a moment, Vachon's remembered plea echoing through his head, he couldn't go on.

"And he wasn't pleased?" Lacroix suggested.

Nick gathered up the photos, putting them neatly back into their respective folders, not looking up to meet Lacroix's waiting eyes. "No," he said finally. "He wasn't pleased."

"Ah."

Nick reconsidered. "The truth is, Lacroix, if he'd had any of the vampire left in him, he would have killed me. I was still a little stronger than he was, and I managed—just barely—to throw him out."

Lacroix steepled his long, white fingers, his painted lips pursed in thought. "I take it he wanted you to bring him back across."

"I don't know," Nick admitted. "I couldn't have done it, anyway. It was too late."

The penciled eyebrows drew together, frowning. "And if you could have . . .?"

"I don't know." Nick stared at the tabletop, unwilling to face that truth-compelling gaze. "After Janette . . . I don't know."

Lacroix took a sip from his glass. "But it was a moot point."

Nick took the offered concession. "That was back in April. I called Tracy and tried to warn her, but she wouldn't listen. Vachon never showed up at her place, and no one's seen or heard from him since. Has he been here?"

Lacroix shook his head. "Urs would be the one to talk to." He clicked his fingers and the hovering Victor appeared. "Would you see if Ursula is here?" Lacroix murmured. "When he stopped coming in, I merely assumed he'd left town. Ursula did seem a tad moody, but I never gave it a second thought. And the girl, Tracy? Does she know?"

Nick didn't understand for a moment. When he realized what Lacroix was asking, the bottom seemed to drop out of his stomach. "I don't know," he had to admit. "She might not—my God, the bite marks! If she *doesn't* know, she'd see them as proof positive it's *not* Vachon!"

Lacroix poured himself another glass, then snapped his fingers for the waiter. "Nicholas . . . a glass of Bordeaux would do you good. Please. Allow Victor to fetch you one."

Nick nodded. Just thinking about Vachon, about the dead girls, Tracy . . . His hands were shaking by the time the waiter rushed back, and he gulped half of the glass down before he even tasted the dry, noble bite of the wine. "He kept shouting—crying—'I don't want this!' I can't get it out of my head. Maybe if he'd had a chance to think about it, if he'd had the choice—!"

"And he blames you?" Lacroix asked. "Or her?"

"Looking at those pictures, I'd have to say he blames Tracy. But it should be me. I should have told them as soon as I knew. Either that or made sure he'd stayed away from her in the first place."

Lacroix threw his head back and laughed, a big, rippling, rich sound. "Oh, Nicholas . . .! I should have known you'd find a way to bring it round to fall on your head! My poor, pitiable martyr . . .! If it was anyone's fault, it was the Spaniard's, in hesitating. He should have killed her or brought her across, not fumbled with indecision, waiting for her to make a choice or you to give them permission or whatever else it was that delayed him from doing the inevitable. *That* was his undoing—that and that alone."

Nick swallowed the last of the Bordeaux. Even before he started to lower the glass to the table, Victor was there with the bottle, waiting at trembling attention for Lacroix's nod to pour or flee. "Yes," Nick said. "Thank you."

He saw Lacroix's head turn, followed the vampire's brightened gaze to find Urs drifting toward them, a sweet, vague expression on her face. It was disconcerting to realize, perhaps for the first time, that he couldn't tell vampires from mortals. If Vachon hadn't been back to the Raven, this could be why. An indiscriminate choice of dance partners could be deadly.

"Javier?" Urs said in response to Lacroix's query. Her soft, white shoulders moved in a hug-me shrug. *No wonder Vachon fell in love with her*, Nick found himself thinking. She seemed so childlike, so abandoned. "I can't feel him. He's just . . . gone." For a moment her dark eyes seemed about to fill with tears. "He'd met this band from Montreal . . . I didn't like him spending so much time with them . . ."

"You argued?" Lacroix supplied, looking like an understanding parent.

She nodded miserably. "And then he left. I haven't seen him for . . ." A shake of her head, the blonde curls trembling. "You haven't heard anything—?"

Nick left it to Lacroix to offer up the lies. He knew he couldn't look into those eyes and tell her anything, especially not the truth.

When she'd drifted off again, Nick turned to Lacroix in confusion. "Why didn't he come to Urs, if he wanted to be brought across?" he asked. "It doesn't make sense. Or to you—you would have done it, if he'd . . ."

Lacroix was running one white finger round and round the crystal edge of his glass, making it moan. There was a pensive frown on his face. "Would I?" he murmured, and chilly understanding hit Nick: Lacroix might well have found Vachon's predicament highly amusing instead of desperate, and left him to lie in the mortal bed he'd made for himself.

"As you yourself said, Nicholas, it's not a choice to be made lightly," Lacroix said. "The Spaniard would need to walk a delicate balance, finding himself a maker who was old enough and skilled enough not to take too much and kill him in the attempt; but those of us with that skill are sometimes not so eager to make ourselves new children. Vachon, as you know, was not what you would call a biddable sort. I suspect he might have made an even more aggravating son than you were."

Nick took a drink of the wine, a thousand questions still clamoring in his head. If Vachon didn't come to either Urs or Lacroix for help, where had he gone? His only other "child," Screed, was dead. And despite his frequent presence at the Raven, he hadn't made many friends. Maybe all his years on the run from the Inca had convinced him it was better to be solitary than betrayed. Or maybe he preferred the company of mortals—there was the band Urs mentioned.

Was it possible he'd accepted being mortal? Had he started a new life in Montreal, playing with the band?

A glance at the file folders with their hidden horrors reminded him. There was no "acceptance" to be found in the brutal things he'd done to those three dead girls. No, he was in Toronto, and he was anything but happy in his new life.

Lacroix put the tips of his long fingers together, making an ungodly steeple. "So . . . you want me to find him for you."

"It depends."

Lacroix crooked his head. "Depends?"

"On what your price is," Nick said with a weary smile. "I've bargained with you in the past, Lacroix, and come out very badly. So: yes, I'd very much appreciate your help in finding him. But no, I'm not willing to give up just anything in exchange."

Lacroix was silent for so long, Nick began to get nervous. Maybe he'd misread the old dragon. Maybe he wasn't in a position to bargain anymore, especially with someone like Lacroix. It caught him off guard when Lacroix did finally reply.

"I lost you a long time ago, Nicholas. Or perhaps you never were mine. It makes no difference now. And like the Spaniard, I made a choice based on passion rather than reason, and it turned out to be the wrong choice. I have only myself to blame."

"Are you saying you'll find him?" Nick asked.

Lacroix gave him an unreadable smile, his expression sad and amused at the same time. He placed one white, cool hand on Nick's, and said, "Yes, Nicholas. For old time's sake, and for you, I'll find him."

4

"Carry me caravan, take me away.
Take me to Portugal, take me to Spain . . ."

The moment he saw the dark head bent over the guitar, hair spilling in haphazard curls, Nick knew the information he'd been given was correct.

The voice on the phone—an anonymous voice—had given Nick a name and an address. Repeated the address once, to make sure he had it correct, then hung up.

So here he was in an old warehouse in the industrial district at four in the morning, standing hidden in the shadows, listening to a ragged, motley band hammer away at the Tragically Hip's "Little Bones" for an hour and half, making no discernible progress. The music was . . . loud. Not much more. The singer was overmiked, completely drowning out everything but the drummer. Nick decided he'd wait it out, preferring to talk to Vachon without the other band members present.

At four-forty they finally unplugged, and Nick painfully and stiffly climbed to his feet.

"You comin', Cowboy?" the bass player asked as Vachon set down the electric guitar and picked up a battered acoustic. "We're gonna get some beer, go over to Petie's."

Vachon, still in black, hair caught in an untidy ponytail, barely looked up from his guitar. He was sitting on a ratty old sprung sofa, one long leg tucked under him, the other stretched out, tapping out a beat. "Nah. Think I'll stay and practice some more. Thanks anyway, Randy." He was thinner than Nick remembered.

The others trailed out in a noisy straggle, the burned-leaf smell of pot lingering behind them. Nick waited until he heard the sound of their van leaving, broken muffler blatting as they roared away, then stepped out of the shadows.

Vachon, nodding in time to the piece he was playing, didn't notice him approaching. He was good, Nick realized with surprise; a little sloppy, dragging his fingers over the strings instead of making his changes sharp and crisp, but still really good.

"Are you Ron Bennett?" he finally asked.

No reaction. Nick waited, then opened his mouth to ask again. At the same moment, Vachon replied, "Ron Bennett. That's me." He segued into something Nick recognized, but couldn't immediately place. As Vachon started humming/singing to himself, it clicked: "Riders on the Storm." Nick waited a moment, but for all intents and purposes, Vachon might as well have been alone in the big room. Interrupting would be pointless. "Riders on the storm . . . into this house we're born, into this world we're thrown . . . riders on the storm . . ."

He struck the last chord, letting the sound ring. Struck it again. Finally looked up, smiling a little. "Nice song. Really like that one. What can I do you for, man?"

Nick stared at him. It was Vachon—there was no doubt about that. But there was no recognition in the sleepy brown eyes. No recognition, and not a hell of a lot else either. "Do you remember me?" Nick asked, thinking, My God, he's thin!

A shrug. "Sorry." Vachon started to play something else, humming, and Nick put his hand on the strings, muting the sound.

"I need to talk to you, Ron."

Another pause. As if the words took a while to filter through. Another shrug. "Nobody calls me Ron. Just 'Cowboy.' " He set the guitar down, pulled the elastic out of his hair, scraped all the loose bits in, and secured it again. Picked up the guitar, taking a moment to reacclimatize his hands to the strings.

Something unmistakably Spanish this time, frowning hard over the rippling arpeggios. Fingers buzzing over the strings, passionately slapping the rhythm on the worn wooden surface of the guitar. All alone in his own little world.

He's stoned, Nick realized. It was hard to see the pupils in the coffee brown of his eyes, but when Nick looked close, they were huge black moons. And there were bruise-like shadows under his eyes, like he'd been up for days and nights on end with no sleep. "I'm a friend of Petie's," Nick improvised, stalling for time, all his original plans out the window. "I was going out for some Chinese—you want to come along? I know this place, makes great Kung Pow chicken."

Vachon's playing slowed, but his fingers continued to move over the strings easily. A head-tilt embarrassed shrug. "Nah. I'm . . . a little short."

"That's okay," Nick said. "I'll buy. You hungry?"

For the first time, Vachon's playing faltered. He considered, a little color rising to his sallow cheeks. "I don't think so, man," he said with a smiling shake of his head. "I really appreciate the offer, but . . . I'm not really into that."

Nick had no idea what he was talking about. "Sorry, I don't . . .?" He smiled encouragingly.

Vachon rolled his eyes, laughing a little. "I know Petie likes to go both ways, and that's cool, but . . . hey, even a plate of Kung Pow right now couldn't make me get it up for another guy. Thanks, but . . . no thanks."

Nick felt the blush race right up to his hairline. "No—" he said hastily. "No, that's not what I—"

Vachon was already strumming the guitar again, oblivious. He cocked his head, chuckling to himself. "Just after we got back from Montreal— When was that? August? . . . There was this guy, Andre, hung around Grossman's on open stage nights . . . I know how the girls feel, y'know? I must've told him a dozen times, but every time I turned around, there he was, big limpid eyes, hand on my knee, Jesus—! He called me 'Angel Face,' can you imagine that? Used to drive Jojo crazy having him hanging around, but I didn't care. I figured he'd get tired of me saying no and give up sooner or later. It was weird but . . . it was no big deal. Urs probably felt the same way, me mooning after her, crazy in love."

His gaze dimmed a little, his fingers starting to pluck softly at the strings of the guitar. "One night Andre just never showed up . . . I never thought about it till now. Somebody must've warned him off. Maybe Jojo?" He stopped playing, staring at the dusty floor, regret and dismay in his distant gaze. "I wasn't strung out then," he said softly.

"Just Chinese food," Nick promised, catching his eye with a wave. "Nothing else. When did you eat last?"

An embarrassed shrug, Vachon's dark eyes cutting away. "Randy gave me a sandwich . . ."

"Are you hungry?" Nick asked again.

". . . yeah, but . . ." The words trailed off helplessly, as if he couldn't think of a plausible excuse not to go.

"Well, come on, then." Nick smiled, holding out his hand to pull him out of the sprung couch.

Conflict rippled across the younger man's face. He looked like he wanted to say yes. His head even gave an almost imperceptible nod. But what came out of his mouth was, "I . . . I can't."

"You can't?" Nick decided to keep it light, easy, big smile, no hassle. Just an old friend of a friend offering to buy him a plate of chow mein. He glanced round the deserted warehouse. "Your friends all left. Nobody's stopping you."

Vachon looked dubious, the silent guitar against his chest like a protective charm. Again his face had that unmistakable wanting-to-say-yes expression while his mouth replied, "I don't know . . ."

I don't know was an improvement over *I can't*, Nick thought, wishing fleetingly that he could use his old vampire power of persuasion. *Maybe I should be more direct, decide it for him* . . . Gently tugging the guitar out of Vachon's arms—"Give it to me."—he set it in its stand, then offered his hand once more.

"Come on—you look like a man who could use a good bowl of hot and sour soup. You're hungry, I'm paying, and there's nobody here to stop you. You can't say no."

His instincts were dead on: there was a momentary puzzled silence, but no protest. Then Vachon accepted his hand. "Okay . . ." Lurched unsteadily to his feet, having to put his hand on the back of the sofa to get his bearings. When they were face to face, he frowned at Nick. "Do I know you?"

"From . . . a long time ago," Nick said, not offering his name.

"Oh." Vachon accepted it without question, looking round for his jacket. Nick helped him into it, scanning the cuffs, the collar, for telltale rusty-red stains. Was that blood on the sleeve? He couldn't tell for sure. What he'd give to get this jacket to Nat!

The sight of the Caddy seemed to pluck at Vachon. He stopped, staring at the car. Maybe he recognized it?

"Great fins." Nothing more.

5

"Let me sleep all night in your soul kitchen . . .
warm me now in your gentle stove . . ."

They drove in silence to a nearby all-night Szechuan restaurant, and Nick ordered for both of them while Vachon went in search of a washroom. When he came back, he'd lost the elastic somewhere along the way, and was having difficulty keeping his hair out of his eyes.

What in the name of God had happened to him? Nick couldn't help staring, unable to think of anything to say. Vachon was tapping his fingers obliviously on the plastic-sheeted tabletop, humming along with the music in his head. His hair was lank, dirty, his clothes worse, and it looked like it had been a couple of weeks since he'd bothered shaving. About as long since he'd had a solid meal. When the first dish arrived, he wolfed it down like a starving man, giving up early on the chopsticks and using the serving spoon instead.

"Where are you staying these days?" Nick asked while they were waiting for the next dish. "Have you got a place?"

"I just crash at the warehouse. Keep an eye on the stuff." Vachon glanced around for the first time since the food arrived, suddenly uncomfortable. "It's just about daylight."

It belatedly occurred to Nick that Vachon might have found someone to bring him back across. One look at the empty brown eyes told him that was crazy: no vampire could possibly look this sleep-deprived and malnourished. "You have a problem with that?" he asked carefully. "Daylight?"

But the question merely brought a puzzled frown, and another shrug. "No . . ." With a twitching shudder, Vachon suddenly dug in his jeans pocket, pulled out a empty pill bottle. While Nick watched in shock, he tipped three or four of the yellow and peach tablets into his hand, not bothering to count them or even see how many of each kind he had, and dry-swallowed them.

"What's that?" Nick asked, trying to pretend he didn't recognize them: Talwin, Ritalin, and Dilaudid, all the heavy-duty street favorites.

Vachon glanced at the window again, not answering. Getting anxious. Maybe starting to remember things? Like who Nick was, what he did for a living?

"You know, I've got room at my place," Nick offered. "No offense, but you could use a shower."

A ghost of the wry smile Nick remembered flickered across Vachon's face. "Sure could." His hand scraped at his unruly hair and the smile faded, his expression bemused. "Lost my elastic."

"A shower and about twenty hours of sleep," Nick went on.

The word "sleep" nailed it: Vachon sighed, eyes momentarily losing focus, the weight of the hours pulling him down. "That'd be great . . ."

Decide it for him, Nick reminded himself. "We'll finish eating," he said, "and then you'll come with me to my place. Have a shower. Sleep."

Vachon was nodding. "Yeah. I could go—"

He stopped so abruptly, Nick thought he might be choking. Color left his face, something unseen ripping through him like a razor.

"What's the matter?" Nick started to rise, alarmed. "Cowboy? Can you talk? Are you all right?"

Another spasm went through Vachon, invisible steel fingers squeezing hard, making him gasp. "I can't go with you—"

Whatever it was suddenly released him. He slumped against the green-tea-colored wall behind the booth, face grey, his breathing ragged. "No. No, I can't. I can't."

Nick sank back into his seat, giving him a minute to catch his breath. *What the hell just happened here?* he wondered. "Better now?" No reply. He leaned closer, trying to get Vachon to focus on him, listen to him. It wasn't easy. "Hey, Ron—" he said. "Cowboy—listen to me for a minute. I want to get you some help. You've got a real problem."

Vachon was listening, but he didn't like what he was hearing. "I'm okay . . ." Wincing again. Shoulders rising, like he was trying to block something out, the music in his head, a voice. Looking profoundly uncomfortable, he abruptly pushed the sleeve of his shirt back—track marks mapped his veins like angry bug-bites—and started scratching his arm; and, as Nick watched uncomfortably, he kept scratching long after any normal itch would have disappeared. Then his hand jumped to his neck, like there was something nipping at him under his skin. Dull red welts marked the trails his fingernails left.

"Come on," Nick said persuasively. "You mean to tell me you *like* sleeping in a warehouse? On that sofa with the springs sticking out? That you wouldn't like a shower, a couple days to just sleep and nothing else?"

"I don't know . . ." Still scratching. Nick put his hand out to get him to leave the raw-looking spot alone, and Vachon shied away violently.

Okay, Nick thought. *Take it easy. Don't push, or you could lose him.* "It's all right," he told him, backing off.

"This is no good. I should get back—"

"Shanghai noodles," Nick reminded him, and miraculously on cue, the waiter came by with the dish. Whatever was prodding Vachon to leave lost out to hunger, and he stayed put, shoveling noodles into his bowl.

But time was running out: he ate a few spoonfuls, but his heart wasn't in it. Withdrawal, Nick guessed: he was starting to come down fast and hard from whatever he was on, the pills either not working or just not working fast enough.

He could arrest Vachon for possession, but was that the best thing to do? Would he get any more information out of him at this point, or would it be better to keep an eye on him, see who else turned up at the warehouse? He'd be willing to let him go, he decided, as long as he could get hold of his jacket to take to the lab.

"I gotta go—"

Vachon was sliding out of the booth, anxious as hell, a slick of sweat on his face, his neck. Nick tossed a couple of twenties on the table, far more than the bill would be. "If you need money, I could lend you some," Nick said. "You don't even have to pay me back."

Vachon licked his lips, eyes hungry on the green bills. "I could use a couple of bucks . . ." Another sudden tremor overtook him and for a second Nick thought he was going to be sick. But he shook it off, blinking rapidly, insisting, "I gotta get back before the sun comes up—"

"Let me drive you. If you walk, it'll take an hour."

Vachon's shoulders twisted, invisible snakes under his skin. "Okay—"

Halfway back to the warehouse, his teeth started chattering. "Let me take you to a hospital," Nick pleaded. "You're in bad shape, Cowboy. Let me help you."

"I can't—" The words were shaken away in another fit of trembling as they stopped for a red light.

Nick looked at him, full of doubt. Could this be the killer they were looking for? Even high, would he have the strength to wrestle anyone to the ground, overpower them, brutalize them for half an hour or more? And then drag the body to a dumping ground? "I can help you," he said again, waving his hand in front of Vachon's face to get his attention. "I can *help* you. Don't you want that?"

Vachon struggled to get his teeth to stop chattering long enough to reply. His eyes mutely said yes. His expression, desperate, hopeless, said yes. But something else shook his head. "No—"

The light was green; an impatient Jeep behind him honked. Nick put the Caddy in gear and moved ahead. They'd be at the warehouse in another minute more. "I don't believe you," he said. "You do want help. Whatever's waiting at the warehouse isn't what you really want, is it?"

No reply. Two more blocks, and he'd be gone. "Can you honestly tell me you want to live like this?" Nick pressed.

"No—"

"You like being high?"

"*No*—!"

"Then let me help you, damn it!"

A groan, eyes rolling upward, begging. Tears leaking out as his mouth struggled to answer. "I *can't*—"

Last chance. Nick slammed on the brakes, stopping half a block away from the warehouse. Vachon nearly went into the dashboard, boneless and off-balance, and Nick grabbed the sleeve of his jacket. "I can't leave you here. Vachon, you're sick! You need to get to a hospital, into treatment—"

Too late he caught himself. Vachon's head came up, eyes wide, black surrounded by white. With a moan, he fumbled for the door handle. Nick clung to his sleeve, trying to haul him back. Vachon twisted, ducking out of the jacket as he shoved the door open. Before he could fall out, Nick whipped a handcuff round his passenger's wrist, squeezing it tight. But as he dragged Vachon back into the car, snapping the other cuff round the steering wheel, something slammed into the back of his head with the force of a sledge hammer.

The steering wheel flew out of his hand. The last thing he saw was Vachon's startled face as he scrambled out the passenger door. Then something wrenched his head back, baring his throat, and in a rush of pain, everything turned red.

6

"Try to run, try to hide,
break on through to the other side . . ."

It took four rings before Tracy figured out it was the phone, not her alarm, making all the noise.

"Tracy, have you heard from Nick?" Natalie asked. "He left a message for me at work, but when I tried to call him back, he didn't answer his cell or beeper. I've tried about half-a-dozen times, but even Dispatch can't raise him."

Still half asleep, Tracy sat up in bed, trying to focus on the clock radio. Ten-thirty in the morning: she'd been asleep for exactly half an hour. "He got a call about one-thirty, maybe two. Said it was a snitch with something about a case we're working on."

"He didn't tell you where he was going?"

"I asked, but he said he didn't want to spook the guy. It was supposed to be some routine thing, nothing important."

But Natalie wouldn't be calling two-and-a-half hours after shift ended looking for Nick if he'd been on something routine, Tracy knew. And he wasn't someone who didn't answer his cell, beeper *and* Dispatch unless something was wrong.

"I'll call in an APB on the Caddy," Tracy promised, already rummaging one-handed in her drawer, looking for underwear, a clean T-shirt. "Don't worry, Nat. We'll find him."

* * * * *

There was a familiar voice calling from somewhere nearby, but he couldn't place it; couldn't put a face to it, or figure out where it was. He was desperately thirsty, but when he tried to open his mouth to speak, a thin, bubbling sound came out. He couldn't see, could only hear his heart, beating too fast, too fast, racing, tripping, trying to hang on to a steady rhythm. His ears were full of the sound.

The voice again. "Natalie?" he tried to ask, but something filled his mouth, something cold, tasting of copper and death.

He tried to cry out, tried to refuse, but he couldn't seem to draw a breath. The frantic beating of his heart was ominously silent.

Take it, Nicholas, the voice in his head told him. *Take it or die.*

I don't want it—Oh, God, Natalie—!

If you refuse, you'll never see her again, the voice said. *Damn you, Nicholas! This isn't for me, it's for you! Take it! Take it!*

I don't—

A brilliant white light filled his head, muscles stuttering with electrical bursts, desperate for the oxygen that wasn't coming and, with Natalie's face before him, knowing the voice was right, he'd never see her again, never hear her laugh, never see their unborn child—he swallowed.

* * * * *

"Tracy?" It was Joe Reese. "Dispatch says 25-Juliet found Nick's Caddy. It's empty, but there's blood all over the driver's seat and headrest."

She scribbled the address down on the notepad she kept in the car. "I'm on my way."

Flooring it, she thought how Vachon loved to tease her about the air bag, the ABS, all the dull, solid safety features. He would have been surprised to see the way she pushed the safe, solid car through red lights and snarled traffic and fleeing pedestrians, about as safe as a bullet fired into a crowd.

If Nick wasn't in the Caddy—if his body wasn't in the Caddy—then he was somewhere else. And if he was somewhere else, there was a possibility he'd got there on his own. That he was still alive. She didn't want to think of how he'd looked in the ambulance that time he'd been shot.

* * * * *

From one of the tall windows of the warehouse, Vachon stood in the sun, eyes closed, drinking in the warmth. His black T-shirt absorbed the heat like a sponge, drenching him in heat, making sweat bead up over his lip, on his forehead. He stood there oblivious until it was running down in rivulets, the neck of his T-shirt soaked, the hair hanging in his eyes curling in wet corkscrews.

How had he ever forgotten how incredible this felt?

All he could see was a flickering red pattern, the sun through his eyelids, burning him, lifting him in a cloud of smoke, taking him away.

His eyes opened. Momentarily blinded, he blinked sightlessly at the dirty window, confused. The sun couldn't burn him. Why did he think it could? He glanced over his shoulder at the doorway leading to the sunless inner room, to the locked door. Why was he supposed to hide from the sun? Why was he supposed to be asleep now?

He looked longingly at the street four stories below, wondering if he would smash into pieces if he let himself fall through the glass. At the same moment, something tore through him, pain so wrenching it drove him to his knees. Reminding him why he shouldn't wish for death. That there were terrible consequences, even for wishing. With fumbling hands, he dug in the pocket of his jeans, coming up with a single precious peach-colored tablet, the only one left. Licked it into his dry mouth, choked it down. He hated the way they blurred everything, but they were the only thing that took away the pain.

He pressed his wet face against the scalding glass, trying to empty his head, to feel nothing but the heat, the sun. It hurt too much to think.

❑❑❑❑❑

Tracy shaded her eyes against the bright noonday sun, scanning the area where the empty Caddy had been found. There wasn't a lot of blood on the seat and headrest, but it still made her legs watery with worry. The driver's side window had been punched in—the officer at the scene said "smashed" in, but one look told Tracy it had been punched. By the same hand that had ripped the steering wheel right off the column and thrown it in the street, handcuffs still attached. Knowing that made the bloodstains worse.

Why had Nick come here? Why had he stopped practically in the middle of the street? Why were the doors both wide open?

Going over it slowly, she worked it out in her head, almost seeing it play like a jerky freeze-frame movie: Nick and somebody are in the car. He stops suddenly—the black skid marks—and they struggle. Nick hangs onto the other person's jacket—there on the seat—but the man slips out of it. Throws open the door, jumps out—

And then what? Runs around to the driver's side while Nick obligingly waits for him to punch in the window? No. There had to have been someone else there. Whoever was in the car ran. Whoever left the jacket wasn't the one who broke the window.

"Are you finished?" she asked the crime scene unit, and they let her get into the car. She wanted to get her hands on the black leather jacket half inside out, abandoned when the "informant" fled. As soon as she turned the sleeve right side out and got a good look at it, her heart gave a painful lurch of recognition. Lifting the jacket to her nose, she took a deep breath. It smelled terrible, but beneath the grime and sweat, it smelled familiar too.

Getting back out of the car, she called the officers over. "I want a building to building search. Every inch. Whoever was in this car might still be nearby, and I want him found."

"We'll need search warrants, Detective—"

"Get them, then! We've got a missing cop—do you want to wait till he's dead before you start looking for him?"

Again she scanned the empty warehouses, slowly checking every window, every floor. *Where are you?* she silently pleaded. *Vachon, show me where you are, so I can help you! If Nick's hurt—or dead—every cop in Toronto will be out for your head.*

7

"Before you slip into unconsciousness,
I'd like to have another kiss . . ."

Someone was carrying him, cradling him as if he were no more than a tiny child, running with him. There was a smell of burning flesh, an inhuman cry of pain and rage—and then darkness. Safety.

He remembered this. Being safe in the dark. It still made him feel sick inside going out in bright daylight, no matter how many months it had been now.

"Here, drink this—" A bottle was pushed into his wooden hand, strong arms lifted him up, held the bottle, put it to his lips.

As soon as the blood smell hit him, he tried to push the bottle, the hands, away. "No, I don't want—"

"You don't have a choice, Nicholas!" Lacroix shouted. "It was this or die! Now drink it!"

Part of him shrank away, hating Lacroix, hating himself. The other part accepted the truth, and drank. Lacroix was right. Dying would have served no purpose whatsoever. Natalie would have been left a widow, their child fatherless. Tracy could die without Nick's newfound knowledge about Vachon to help solve this case. And Vachon . . . whatever he was caught up in, it was slowly killing him. If Nick died, Vachon died too.

"Who was it?" he asked as he sat up. "Lacroix, who attacked me? Did you see anyone?"

"I was waiting at the warehouse," Lacroix replied, nursing his burns by pouring blood on them. "I didn't know where you had gone, otherwise I would have followed. I heard the car pull up, but by the time I reached you, they were gone. Possibly locked inside the warehouse somewhere, a safe room, an underground passage—I didn't wait to find out. The sun was only minutes away."

Nick's regained mortality had felt strange after 800 years, but becoming a vampire again after less than twelve months—it was as if he were in someone else's skin. Everything was completely familiar—and utterly foreign at the same time. From a distance, he watched himself reach for another bottle of blood. Someone else with a raging newborn thirst gulped it down.

"What time is it?" he asked, then remembered his watch. Eleven-fifteen. At least he could rest with the knowledge that both Tracy and Vachon were safe until sundown. After that . . . His eyes shone red in the darkness.

❑❑❑❑❑

When Natalie opened the door to find Tracy standing there, her first thought was, *They found him. He's all right.* Then she saw the too-tight set to Tracy's mouth. "No . . ." she breathed.

"No!" Tracy hastened to tell her. "No, we don't know yet—but it doesn't look good, Natalie. Can I come in?"

"Of course—" They sat at the dining room table, formally, each trying to be businesslike and levelheaded. "They haven't found him?"

"Just the car," Tracy sighed, and filled Natalie in on the location, the blood— "There wasn't a lot, Nat, and you know how scalp wounds bleed. Whoever broke the window probably hit him with something to knock him out."

Then, without another word she handed the big evidence bag with the jacket in it to Natalie. "You shouldn't have this here," Natalie said at once. "You should have taken it straight to—"

"Listen," Tracy said. "We have to talk, just you and me, *before* this goes to the lab. Before anybody else finds out we've got it."

Natalie's eyes widened. "Is it—?"

"Vachon's? Yeah. It was on the front seat."

Carefully closing the bag, Natalie gave Tracy a pointed look. "If you're asking me to 'lose' evidence . . ."

"No, nothing like that. I just don't want anybody to know whose it is but us. He wasn't the one who hit Nick. Let me explain . . ."

The part that was almost funny was the relief Natalie felt at being able to speak openly about Nick having once been a vampire. About knowing Vachon was one, too—*or had been one,* she thought, suddenly not feeling all that cheerful anymore. Nick had told her about his meeting with Lacroix.

Should she tell Tracy? It would be unfair not to.

It wasn't until she heard herself saying, "He probably didn't know until it was too late," that the full implication of it struck her. And by the stricken look on Tracy's face, all her color gone, Natalie realized she'd just proved Nick's case against Vachon.

"You mean . . ." Tracy began, swallowing, ". . . if he hadn't fallen in love with me, he'd still be a vampire now? *I* was the reason he—changed?"

Natalie tried to smooth it over. "That doesn't mean—"

"What? That he doesn't resent me taking that away from him? That he doesn't have a damn good reason for hating me? Natalie, Nick *wanted* to be mortal! He spent years—centuries!—doing everything he could to leave the vampire behind. But Vachon—" Her mouth suddenly crumpled, tears spilling. "Oh, God, Nat, what have I done? What if it *is* him? It's all my fault—"

Natalie put her arms around her, letting her sob. Much as she wanted to let go and cry with her, she knew if she broke down now, everything would fall apart. "Okay—" she said briskly after a minute, giving Tracy a little shake. "Come on, we've got work to do, Trace."

Tracy looked up at her with red-rimmed eyes. "Work?"

Natalie was already on her feet, gathering up coat, briefcase, keys. "I've got to find something to tie this to Vachon," she said, adding the evidence bag with his jacket to the load she carried. "And you've got to find him. Is there anything at your place that might still have evidence on it? A hairbrush, clothes . . .?"

"The church!" Tracy said. "I went there after he disappeared, and everything was still there. Maybe it still is."

They both checked their watches. Natalie gave her a brief smile. "We have a couple hours," she said, not having to explain: till sundown.

"What do you want me to do?" Tracy asked.

The last thing Natalie wanted to do was send Tracy down to the Raven in search of Lacroix, but he was probably their only hope. She knew now that Nick's sudden abandonment of Tracy the night before must have been because he'd had a lead on Vachon, and wanted to check it out alone. "You know the guy they call the 'Nightcrawler' over at the Raven?"

Tracy rolled her eyes. "Don't tell me, let me guess. He got the information for Nick. And you want me to go check it out."

"But be careful down there," Natalie warned. "The club is—"

"A vampire hangout," Tracy finished for her. "Nat, give me a break! I knew about that. I knew about the Nightcrawler, and a lot of the others." Then she gave her head a self-deprecating shake. "But I never guessed about Nick. Some detective I am!"

"He went out of his way to make sure you never knew," Natalie said. "It was for your own good."

A jagged look cut across Tracy's pretty face. "A lot of things were for my own good," she said bitterly. "That's why we're all in such a mess today—Nick, Vachon, me, probably even you. If everybody had just trusted me to make up my own mind, none of this would have happened!"

With that, she jerked her head toward the door. "Let's get going. I'll show you where the church is, and I'll call you as soon as I talk to the Nightcrawler."

8

"My wild love went riding . . ."

If Natalie was apprehensive about letting herself into the old church where Vachon used to live, she was completely unnerved by the time she was finished collecting what little evidence wasn't smashed, broken, and embedded in the walls. It looked like he—she assumed it was Vachon—had gone berserk, destroying everything he owned. Furniture was in sticks and shreds, clouds of stuffing everywhere. Pictures, small things he'd collected, were ground underfoot, unrecognizable. The bed had been smashed to kindling, the sheets reduced to ragged strips of fabric dark with old bloodstains. Every window, glass or boarded up, was shattered.

But she found a hairbrush under some debris: a hairbrush with some long black strands twined in the bristles. More than enough for a DNA analysis. When she got the brush out into the fading light—(*only another half hour before the sun's down*)—she saw there were blonde hairs in the brush as well. Probably Tracy's, but she'd let the lab find out for sure.

The blood on the remnant of sheet she'd brought along could be Tracy's too. But then again, she thought bleakly, both the blonde hairs and the blood could belong to one of the victims instead.

❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑

Vachon was curled up on the floor in front of the window when she woke up. Arms hugging himself, he was shivering in his sleep: cold or dreaming, she couldn't tell. On second thought, it might be because she'd cut back on his fix yesterday, punishment for leaving the warehouse.

She gave him a nudge with her foot. "Javier?" Wondered if she could risk feeding right away, before she gave him the drug. Another nudge, bringing absolutely no response. Maybe not. She didn't like the taste of the drug in his bloodstream, but if she fed first, it threw off the dose. She'd nearly killed him last week. Reluctantly, she went back to the locked, windowless room and brought out the works.

He came out of his semi-conscious state while she was cooking the dose. Watched her with wide moon eyes, barely breathing, as she drew it slowly up into the syringe. "Please—" he whispered, flushed, sweating. His face was twisted with self-loathing.

"Not yet." She liked to make him wait. Liked to make him suffer for it. If he could only see himself—! No more devil-may-care. No more cocky. She thought about how he'd looked that first time she'd seen him, how she'd thought he was so dangerously handsome, some nameless Spanish gunslinger come into town in search of a rich poker game. Now he looked like any other strung-out junkie: dirty, desperate, willing to do anything for his next fix.

Eyes going yellow, she could hardly watch as he anxiously slapped a vein to the surface, the smell of his blood making her giddy. It took longer than usual—he'd have to find someplace new soon, she saw. As he reached for the syringe, she held it out of reach. "Don't be so greedy, Javier," she scolded. "What about me? Don't I get something in return?"

He tried to hide it, but she saw everything, knew everything. "Please," he said again, but there was no strength in it. "I can't, Urs. You know I can't."

"Do you want to go another few hours without this?" she countered.

"Why don't you just kill me and get it over with?" With a shaking hand, he pushed damp strings of hair out of his eyes. "Why drag it out like this?"

"Because I love you, Javier," she said sweetly. Pushing the plunger ever so slightly, she expelled a little of the drug. The message was clear: argue with me, and I'll let it all go to waste.

A soft sound escaped him, somewhere between a whimper and a curse. As she pulled open the collar of her shirt, baring her throat, she bent over him and slid the needle into his vein. "Kiss me," she whispered, thumb poised over the plunger. "Give me what I want, Javier, and I'll do the same for you."

❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑

He'd done well. Even better than the time with the girl. She watched him nodding on the sofa, only the whites of his eyes showing under his fluttering lids. Tomorrow she'd make sure she cut him back even more.

The bruise was already quickly fading, a vivid sunset disappearing as night fell, but she stood in front of the mirror admiring it until it was gone. The sharp lineal cuts from his teeth stood out in red relief against her white throat. Next time, she promised herself, it would be even better.

Just thinking about it made the gold in her eyes turn fiery red. She quickly crossed the floor, kneeling beside him on the old sofa. "Javier . . ." she whispered. "Javier, my love . . ." He jerked as she sank her teeth into his throat, piercing skin and flesh and veins. Even in his drugged, dozing state, he tried to fight her off, struggling, striking out at her with rubbery arms and fists, but she held him down easily, this time drinking her fill, pulling back only when his heart started to stumble and he gasped for breath.

It would be so easy to take that last little bit, she thought. But that would give him the release he'd denied her, denied her even when he'd finished with her, passing her over for that mortal bitch. No, if he wanted death, it wouldn't come from her, and it wouldn't come gently, fading away in a red, orgasmic haze.

Unless he changed his mind, and gave Urs what she wanted. Dipping her finger into the thin stream of blood still leaking from the puncture wounds on his throat, she licked it clean. He still tasted wonderful, even with the drug tainting his blood. Like sweet, oak-barrel flavored Madeira, warm from sitting in the Spanish sun.

Even the touch of her fingers made him shrink away. No, he'd die before he'd give in, she knew. What she wanted was so simple: to give her her life back. But he wouldn't do it. He'd always been so selfish, doing what he wanted to do when he wanted to do it. Sure, he'd listen to her or to Screed, but when it came right down to it, they always ended up doing what he wanted. Like bringing her across, when what she'd asked him for was release. He'd wanted her back then, so it didn't suit him to just let her go to waste.

Well, the tables had turned. It shouldn't be long now. With him half-starved, stumbling around in a chemical haze, no longer sure what was real any more and what was suggestion, it would only be a few days at the most until he broke completely. With the girl, she'd convinced him—for a minute or two, no more—that he was with his beloved Tracy. Her fangs tearing into his throat had snapped him out of it, though. Too bad. She'd blown it right when it was starting to get interesting.

A bizarre thought struck her: what if he was telling the truth? Wouldn't that be funny? She bent over him, using her tongue to lick up the last drops of blood, fangs descending once more. "Don't . . ." he begged in a voice thin as paper.

Wouldn't that be funny, if he was telling the truth? She picked him up in her arms, carrying him into the bedroom, laughing softly to herself.

9

"Hello, I love you,
won't you tell me your name?"

A heavy pounding brought Nick's head up in a hungry rush. "Someone's here—"

Lacroix stirred irritably, slow to wake. "They'll go away soon enough," he muttered. Almost before the last word was spoken, though, he was on his feet. Putting himself between Nick and the door to the bar. "No," he said firmly. "Not that I don't trust you, Nicholas, but if you tear open the throat of some poor plebeian only here to read the gas meter, *I'll* be the one who has to answer for it! Wait here. And behave yourself."

Nick growled, too hungry to pay attention to reason. Lacroix plucked a bottle out of the refrigerated cooler and tossed it to him. "I mean it, Nicholas! Stay here."

The bottle of blood helped a little, but the urge to kill something—anything!—churned in him like a hot, heavy tide. A distant flicker, a century or so of restraint, tried to assert itself but was easily beaten down. Uncorking a second bottle, Nick edged the door open to see who'd come to the Raven so early in the evening, before the sun was completely down. Not a vampire, silhouetted in the doorway, surrounded by a rosy orange glow of fading light.

Her delicate scent caught him like a hook, drawing him out into the bar. Apricots . . .? *Tracy,* he realized, contradictory instincts jostling. Part of him was so glad to see her safe and whole, he wanted to sprint across the floor and hug her. The other part wanted nothing more than the hot, salt spill of her blood on his tongue, fresh blood. *Living* blood. He moaned softly, and Lacroix turned his head ever so slightly, sending a wordless yellow glare.

"It's not safe here," Lacroix was saying in a low voice.

Tracy cut him off with an impatient shake of her head. "Nick's disappeared. We found his car—"

"I know." It was Lacroix's turn to interrupt, his voice deepening, going silky, hypnotic: "Listen to me:

you'll get no information here. Go home, or back to work, wherever you've—"

"Forget it. I'm a resister. Now I *know* Nick came to you for help in finding Vachon, so don't try to snow me with any—" She stopped short, recognizing the shadow glowering at her from across the room. "Oh, my God, Nick—!"

The silence was sudden, the only sound Tracy's quickening heartbeat as Nick sprang. Lacroix was very nearly too late, yanking open the door and jumping back before the last rays of sunlight poured in. Nick spun away with a cry, hands up to shield his face.

"I told you it wasn't safe here!" Lacroix hissed, pressed into a dark space between door and wall where the light couldn't touch him. "It was the only thing I could do—either bring him across or lose him forever. But he's not in control of himself—as you can no doubt see!"

Eyes a sullen red, Nick crouched at the end of the bar, as far away from the sun as he could get. Tracy started to take a step towards him but Lacroix bared his own fangs at her, warning her back.

But she wasn't backing down, even though she was so scared she looked like she'd throw up. "Please, Nick . . .!" she begged. "Get hold of yourself! I need to know what happened—did you find Vachon? Who attacked you?"

He blinked a few times, the red fading to a dull gold. Vachon. The dead girls. A rush of remorse struck him as he realized what he'd nearly done, what he would have done if Lacroix hadn't stopped him. "It's . . . all right," he told Lacroix. "I'll be all right if she stays back."

She looked like a tall, half-grown girl standing there with tears running helplessly down her cheeks, her lips refusing to hold firm. "Oh, Nick . . ." she said again, this time in whispering despair.

He couldn't look at her. Couldn't bear to think of what this would do to Natalie. To have to start all over—! With an effort, he pulled himself back to what Tracy needed to know. "He's in the red brick warehouse," he said. "The one with the For Lease sign on the side. Practices with a band there. Lives there—"

"Is he involved?" Her voice shook. "Did he have anything to do with the killings?"

Thinking of the younger man's empty, haunted eyes, Nick shook his head. "No. I'm pretty sure he isn't. If he is—"

She was quick to jump on it. " 'If he is,' what? What are you saying?"

"It's one of us, isn't it?"

Lacroix's question made them both turn. "Of course it was!" Nick said. "How can you—" He stopped short, stunned. "You mean, killing the girls! I hadn't . . . my God, I hadn't thought of that! But . . . why?"

"You thought it might be the Spaniard, killing pale little substitutes, working his way up to the real thing. It was only a small leap in logic to go to the next step." Lacroix shrugged elegantly. "Who else would want your delicious little partner dead? Who would want to implicate the Spaniard in her murder, but her murderess?"

Tracy knew exactly what he was saying. "Don't you see, Nick? It's *Urs*! Think it through: Vachon brought her across, was with her for years—as much as he was with anybody—and then all of a sudden everything changes. How do you think she felt when she realized he didn't love her anymore? What do you think it did to her to know that all those years with him were over, that he'd left her for me? For *me*!"

"But it doesn't make any sense!" Nick argued. "Why wouldn't she—" *Bring him back across,* he thought, biting his tongue. No, don't bring that into it, not on top of everything else.

But Tracy knew he was hiding something. She glanced from one to the other. "There's something you're not telling me."

Nick raised his head, feeling the telltale heat coming into his eyes. "However he's involved—and I'm not letting him off the hook entirely—she's controlling him."

"Controlling him?" Tracy laughed in disbelief. "*Urs* is controlling Vachon? Are you crazy, Nick? There's no way she could—"

Lacroix, never one to mince words, said, "I'm afraid the Spaniard simply isn't a resister like you, my dear. An unfortunate weakness, in his case."

Tracy took a sharp breath, reality crashing in. She tipped her head back, blinking rapidly, refusing to break down. "How bad is it? Nick?" She turned on him, accusing, and he reacted with an instinctive growl.

"It's not good." Thinking about Vachon, about how much pain he was in, how much danger, made it easier to push away the red curtain. But he didn't want to tell her any more, knowing how it would hurt.

"And when he became mortal—"

"He most likely went to Urs to effect a reversal," Lacroix nodded, knowing exactly what Tracy was thinking.

"So why is he *still* mortal?" Nick asked. "If Urs loves him, why doesn't she bring him back across?"

Lacroix clicked his tongue, looking disappointed. "Love is a terribly complex and ugly state of affairs, Nicholas," he said. "When we can't have the one we want, we sulk and pine; when we are refused, we stamp our feet and weep bitter tears, plotting revenge. And what better revenge than denying the one thing that lover most desires, when he comes crawling back? Not only crawling back, but in love with someone else! Nicholas, Nicholas . . .! She's *angry* with him. She's *punishing* him. But the best part of her revenge is that she's using him to punish your little partner at the same time."

Nick drew a sharp breath, struck by a terrible thought: *she's making him do it*. It all made sense now—Vachon's confusion, his inability to do something he so obviously wanted to do—and his openness to suggestion. Revulsion turning his stomach, he hoped for Vachon's sake that he didn't know what he was doing. What Urs was making him do.

"Nick?" Tracy had come a step closer. "Please. You've got to tell me everything."

"She's right, Nicholas," Lacroix murmured. "She has to be prepared. It will be far worse for her if she has no warning."

Nick closed his eyes a moment, exhausted. It was disconcerting to have this constant push me / pull me from the vampire and the mortal, one minute calm, the next, poised to attack. Lacroix was right, though; he had to tell her the truth, so she didn't fall apart when she saw Vachon. "He's sick, Tracy. It's not good. We've got to get him out of there, away from Urs."

"Sick." Tracy's voice shook, her eyes glistening.

Lacroix made an impatient noise, and Nick glared at him. *Not yet!* he silently growled, his expression speaking for him.

"As you wish." Lacroix sniffed, turning away.

"It's almost nightfall," Tracy said suddenly. "Nick, are you coming?"

He looked at her, frowning. "Me? I can't—"

The shine in her eyes was every bit as fierce as a vampire's. "You're still my partner, aren't you?" she demanded. "Or are you going to use this as an excuse? 'Oh, gee, I can't do my job, stand by my partner because I'm a vampire!' Damn it, Nick—! We worked together before you—" She had to clench her fists and turn away a moment, but struggled back. "Are you coming, or do I have to do this alone?"

The glance from Lacroix said it all: *She won't last a second if she goes alone.*

She might not last ten seconds with me, Nick thought, tucking a couple of bottles into the deep pockets of his trenchcoat. He kept a healthy distance between them as he followed Tracy out into the night.

Nick headed for the Caddy when they got outside, but Tracy rattled her keys at him, nodding towards her safe, dependable air-bagged car, illegally parked outside the Raven. "I'm too wound up to be a passenger," she said. "Hop in."

"Maybe I should sit in the back," he said, truly uncomfortable with her proximity.

"Oh, sure!" She shot him a glance that made him wonder how he'd ever thought she was soft or vulnerable or in need of protection. "You can open the window if you need to cool off, but you're not sitting behind me so I can't tell if you're staring at my jugular. Now get in!"

She drove with a hard, focused fury that Nick knew well from living with Natalie. It was a human thing, he knew: anger channeled into a tight, hot beam. For the first time, he thought they might actually win this one. If Tracy could hang onto her anger, if she could use it, she might stand a chance.

10

"Keep your eyes on the road
and your hands upon the wheel . . ."

"Jesus, Cowboy, wake up!"

Vachon dragged his sandpapered eyelids open with difficulty. Raging thirst was the first thing that hit him. Then the headache. He tried to sit up.

"Oh, man, oh, man . . .!" Randy, the bass player moaned. "Jojo's gonna flip out if he sees you like this! Tonight's the night we're at the Elmo—did you forget?"

"Elmo?" His mind was a blank.

"Yeah, at ten! Come on, get up, let's see if we can walk it off—"

That was a joke: he needed about four days of uninterrupted sleep and a massive blood sugar boost if he was even going to be able to sit up unassisted, let alone play. Randy hauled him to his feet, but being vertical made him want to throw up. If he'd had anything in his stomach, he would have. "Leave me alone . . ." Vachon groaned. "I can't . . ."

"Hey!" Randy gave him an angry jolt, making his head snap back and his teeth click sharply together. "This is my shot, Cowboy! I'm not going to let anybody blow it for me, not even you! You might play the best goddamn guitar I've heard in a long time, but that doesn't get you off the hook. You fuck this one up for me, I don't get another chance. Now *walk*—"

"Gotta have something to eat—" Vachon croaked, his throat dry as dust.

"Don't you dare sit down," Randy warned, leaving Vachon to totter alone a moment while he rummaged in his knapsack. "I've got an Oh Henry and a juice box—knock yourself out, man."

It would have been funny if he wasn't feeling so terrible. The chocolate bar went down in three big, gulping bites, the juice box in a single, open-throated swallow. It hit him with the force of a punch, the sugar driving into his veins like fifty spikes of whatever Urs was giving him all at once.

"Can you carry this?" Randy tried to press the acoustic in its case into Vachon's rubbery hands, but it was pointless. "Okay, okay. I'll carry. Just make it down the stairs to the van without falling and breaking your neck!"

"Where are we going?" Vachon asked. The juice—mostly half-a-dozen forms of sugar, a witch's brew of chemicals and colorings and a whiff of real juice—was making his teeth hurt. At least he was awake.

"The El Mocambo," Randy repeated slowly, as if to an idiot child. "We're playing there at ten, maybe get to sit in with the Tragically Hip if they like us. Their show finishes around midnight, and then they're coming over to the club for a set or two. You don't remember? Oh, man—! It's been set up for *weeks*! Don't give me any crap about this. You knew about it. You're going. And you're gonna play like your fucking life depends on it, you hear me?"

"Yeah. Yeah!" Vachon said, hands over his ears to stop the incessant ringing. The sugar was doing a fandango in his head, stamping feet and clapping hands and high-pitched yipping. He staggered after Randy, wondering how he was going to play when he couldn't feel his hands.

□□□□□

Tracy and Nick arrived at the warehouse about fifteen minutes after Randy and Vachon left. By that time the singer, Jojo, had turned up, the drummer not far behind. "Cowboy?" Jojo snorted. "Probably out looking to score!"

"He's probably gone over to the club early," Beau shrugged. "The Elmo." He pattered away on his thighs with a pair of drumsticks. "His guitars are gone—Randy's too. They're probably on their way."

"They better be," Jojo muttered.

"The Elmo?" Nick asked through clenched teeth, hoping his eyes weren't giving him away. Being near Tracy was bad enough; three mortals in one room was almost unbearable.

"It's a club," Tracy explained. The singer gave her an eyebrows-raised grin, like *You know about a trendy after-hours club?* and she glared at him. "Hey, just because I'm a cop doesn't mean I don't have a life!" she told them. "I was there a couple of weeks ago when Sarah McLachlan dropped in."

"Do you know any of Cowboy's friends?" Nick asked. "How about his girlfriend?"

The look the singer and drummer exchanged spoke volumes. "Oh, *her*," the drummer said.

"We first met Cowboy down at Grossman's, oh, must be six, eight months ago," Beau explained. "Saturday nights, they do a blues open jam. There was some clown up there so drunk, not only does he think he's B.B. King, but right in the middle of 'Stormy Monday,' he up and pukes, right down his shirt. Cowboy just picked up his guitar, and started playing, barely missed four bars. Shit, man, he blew us all away!"

"So he's been with the band since the spring?" Nick asked, surprised. Vachon had still been a vampire then.

"Off and on," Beau nodded. "Jojo got us a gig in Montreal starting the end of July, but Cowboy said he wanted to stick around T.O. We picked up another lead player, but when Cowboy showed up a few weeks later, we showed the other guy the door toot sweet, y'know? We were doing pretty good until the cops closed the place down—guess they didn't have a license or something. We'd kinda pissed the money away, and pretty well had to come back here. Randy lives with his mom and Jojo's got a girl he shacks up with . . . Funny. Cowboy didn't want to come to Montreal in the first place, but he was the one tried to convince us to stay. We got back in September, just after the long weekend."

Nick glanced at Tracy. Vachon was in Toronto in June before the murders started. He left for Montreal sometime in July, probably right after the first murder. Then he was back in September, in time for the second murder on the twenty-third. She nodded glumly, understanding.

"What about his girlfriend?" Nick interrupted. "You started telling us about Grossman's . . .?"

"Oh, yeah." Beau shrugged. "Guess I got sidetracked. We'd only been back in the city about two weeks when she showed up. He was clean back then, probably would have stayed that way without her." Remembering he was talking to a pair of cops, he quickly added, "We're not into that shit—just want to make sure you know that."

Nick could feel Tracy's hard eyes boring into him, but he kept focused on the singer. "Go on."

"It was like old home week." Jojo shrugged. "Lots of 'Where you been?' and 'I been looking for you for weeks,' that kind of stuff. She was real glad to see him, if you catch my drift. Sitting on his lap, sticking her tongue in his ear—"

"—but he wasn't biting," Beau finished for him. "It makes sense now, but we thought he was nuts, pushing away this babe!"

"Anyway," Jojo jumped in again, "we were talking about needing a new place to practice, being as Randy's mom needed her garage, and Urs up and says we can use this place. If the Cowboy's with us, she says, there's no charge. We jumped at the chance."

"But it started to go sour?" Nick guessed.

"I'll say!" Jojo grumbled. "He was fine long as she wasn't around, but if she sat in on a practice, he'd screw up left, right and center. Goddamn junkie."

"No, that's not fair," Beau jumped in. "Remember that first night she brought the stuff in, offered us all a taste? Cowboy didn't want any, turned her down flat." He turned to Tracy. "I used to do a lot until last year—friend of mine came down with hepatitis. So I said thanks but no thanks. Hey, she's all smiles, no problem—but it's a different story with Cowboy. She really pushed him, man. Pushed him and kept pushin' until he's really pissed off at her, tells her to back off, she knows he's not interested—"

"It was ugly," Jojo put in. "I thought he was going to up and pop her one, but he didn't. And then—" He waggled his fingers in the air, humming the *Twilight Zone* theme music.

"He was halfway out the door, looking like he's not going to stop till he hits Texas," Beau said. "And the next thing we all know, he's sitting beside her on the sofa there. He still looked like he wanted to give her a good belt, but he did about three, four lines."

"It was primo, too," Jojo added. "I did a couple lines and it damn near took my head off! Uncut. I don't know where the hell she got it. And it wasn't just coke, either, the bitch—it was a speedball mix. That's the last thing any of us needed, a nice little intro taste of smack!"

"It was downhill after that," Beau said. "He must've been using before—I never seen anybody jump in so fast, less'n it was a relapse kind of thing."

"He's got some kind of shit—pills," Jojo said. "Pops 'em like candy during the day when she isn't around. I took them away once—Jesus H. Christ, was that a bad idea! He was sicker'n a dog, couldn't play for about three, four days. I figured maybe I better just let it be. Maybe a doctor gave it to him . . .?"

"I recognized one of them," Beau put in. "My ex-wife had my kid on the stuff to calm him down. Ritalin. He's got some other ones, too."

"Talwin," Nick nodded, avoiding Tracy's hot eyes. T&Rs were bad enough; he didn't bother mentioning the Dilaudid, a derivative of morphine that was eight times more potent—and just as addictive. "So it was his girlfriend who supplied him?"

"I think she's looking to get laid, but he's so out of it, I doubt they ever do much."

Tracy glanced at her watch, her face flushed. "It's nearly eight."

"So did anything different happen . . . in the last week or so?" Nick asked.

"Last week . . ." Jojo suddenly snapped his fingers. "Yeah, yeah, Randy's birthday! We'd told Cowboy a couple weeks before that we didn't want her hanging around, that he played like crap when she was here—he was jacked up most of the time by then. I thought he'd kick up a fuss, but he said it wouldn't be a problem, they were splitting anyway. I was worried she'd kick us out, but I guess she forgot. —Can I go, man? I gotta start hauling this shit downstairs."

"Sure," Nick said, focused on the drummer. "Tell us what happened."

"She wasn't gone for long," Beau said. "We took Randy out to some strip clubs for his birthday, got him good and loaded. Damned if we don't run into Urs at one of them, and off goes Cowboy with her. About four in the morning, we're all heading home and I don't have my frigging knapsack with my contact lens shit. So I drive all the way back here to get it—and Urs is here with the Cowboy, her an' some other girl, looked like a hooker."

"Can you describe her?" Nick quickly asked.

"Blonde, long legs, short black leather skirt—"

"—red blouse?" Tracy breathed, her face pale. At Beau's nod, she pulled her notebook out of her purse, flipping through it until she reached the page where she'd stapled copies of the photos of the three victims. "Was it this girl?"

"Holy Jesus . . .!" Beau whispered, recognizing "dead" when he saw it. "Yeah! Yeah, that's her! You think they had something to do with it? When I saw them, they were getting high."

"All of them?" Tracy started jotting down notes.

"Not her—Urs—but she was doing Cowboy."

Another vivid blush from Tracy. Nick put his hands over his eyes a moment, pretending to rub them. The fruit smell of her, the swift beat of her heart, were making him almost ill with hunger. "Doing him?" he asked. "What? Having sex with him?"

"Nah—nothing like that!" Beau looked uncomfortable. "*Fixing* him. You know." He pantomimed a syringe.

"And the blonde girl?" Nick asked. "Was she still alive?"

"Far as I know," Beau shrugged, his face doing a "gee-I-don't-think-I-want-to-say-any-more" dance. "She looked pretty stoned, but okay. I figured Urs had some kind of three-way thing planned, and I beat it out of there."

"Whoa, whoa! Back up a bit," Nick said. He fixed his gaze on Beau, pinning him like a bug on a board.

His voice deepened imperceptibly. "Tell me what gave you that idea: a 'three-way thing'? What were they doing?"

Beau rolled his eyes, fighting Nick's persuasive suggestion, but lost: "It was sick, man. Cowboy and the blonde were so out of it, they couldn't have done anything but sleep! But here's Urs pushing them together on the sofa, talking to Cowboy all the while, telling him how good it's going to be. Telling him . . ." He frowned again, shaking his head. "I can't remember."

"Yes, you can," Nick told him firmly. "You can remember exactly what she said. Tell me what it was, Beau."

Tracy's mouth dropped as she suddenly understood why Nick's questioning was so successful. Beau's brow knit together, and he slowly replied:

"She said . . . 'It'll be perfect, Javier. Look who's here: it's Tracy. I brought Tracy here for you.' Like I said, man, it was sick."

Nick knelt, nose wrinkling as he scanned the old sofa. Smelling it, Tracy realized. And the way he glanced up at her, eyes a little too bright, told her he'd found blood. His upper lip started to curl up, the points of his teeth showing white.

She hurriedly put herself between them, blocking the drummer's view. "Thanks for all your help—I guess you'd better get going. Don't want to be late!"

She walked the drummer to the stairs, even carrying one of his cases to speed him along. And give Nick time to cool down.

She found him leaning against one of the big metal supporting beams, a dark green wine bottle—empty—hanging from one hand. He was shuddering like a man who'd just chugged down a fifth of scotch. But his eyes were slowly losing that eerie yellow-green Tracy knew all too well.

"You okay?" she asked.

He nodded, tipping the bottle one last time, letting the remaining drops trickle down the sides and into his mouth. "We'd better get going," he said tightly. "I want to find him before she does."

11

"If you give this man a ride,
sweet family will die . . .
killer on the road . . ."

If Urs had realized just how impressionable Vachon was, she never would have left him alone. Especially not with others around to tell him what to do. Unlike when he was a vampire, she had no sense of him—and had no idea that he'd left the warehouse with the whole night ahead of him. A whole night where anything might happen: a policeman handcuffing him and hauling him in for questioning; an overdose, bought on the street and injected uncut; a car accident.

It didn't occur to her that someone else might coerce him into leaving the warehouse, or that they might stop off at the bass player's parents' place to do a little carbo-loading before the gig. Spaghetti wasn't in Urs' plans.

* * *

Natalie had been hunched over the microscope for so long, her back was locked in place. She straightened with a groan, glancing at the phone, willing it to ring. No word from Tracy. Nothing from the APB. No word on Vachon.

But she'd found fingerprints on glass fragments at the church, and fingerprints on the pill bottle in the jacket pocket: they definitely belonged to Vachon—or at least "J.D. Valdez." With a set of fingerprints as a starting point, she moved on to matching hairs from the brush. She made an unscientific but necessary decision that the long dark hairs were Vachon's; it stood to reason they would be. The blonde ones weren't so easy.

Until she thought to call down to Joe Reese and ask him to authorize her going into Tracy's locker to fetch some more blonde hairs out of the hairbrush she kept there. An added bonus: a new pair of dress shoes with a squashed bandaid stuck to the insole. Natalie plucked it out with a pair of tweezers, holding her breath with hope—and was rewarded with a small rust-colored spot on the pad of the bandaid.

"Grace, I need a DNA workup on these samples as fast as you can get them," she said when she had them ready. "They're on the Watson/Ryerson/Maier case—top priority. Get a PCR first, but see if there's enough for an RFLP as well.”

“Right away, Natalie. Do you—”

Natalie closed her eyes a moment, resisting the urge to grind her fists into them. “Yes, Grace?”

Her assistant had a beautiful smile, especially when it came with good news. “I just wondered if you wanted me to bring you a sandwich, some coffee . . . or maybe the preliminaries from Watson and Ryerson . . .?”

“They’re done already?” Natalie felt her own face pulling into a big grin. “Yes! Yes! Forget the sandwich! To hell with coffee! Have you got them with you?”

“Right here.”

Together they sat at the desk, examining the results. It was a surprise to Natalie to find there were three distinct samples from each case—the killer, the victim, and . . .? Who else? No one had considered an accomplice. With dread, she reached for the file labeled “John Doe” she’d already put together on Vachon.

“That’s the weird part,” Grace said, nodding at the file. “His blood was at the scene, some of it even on the victims’ bodies. But the saliva from the bites on Maier? Somebody else was in on it, too.”

Natalie felt her heart do a little flip, the baby echoing with a kick. “You’re sure?”

“Dead sure,” Grace said, the smile fading. “Two reasons: he’s an AB, but the second person—the biter—isn’t a secretor. No way to mix them up—I ran the tests three times to be sure. And your John Doe’s tox levels were right off the scale. Cocaine, heroin, hydromorphone, methyl fentanyl, you name it. A real designer cocktail. This guy’s a mess.”

“So he might not be involved at all?” Natalie asked, sliding Vachon’s sample into the microscope. “It’s John Doe #2 we should be looking for?”

Grace clicked her tongue. “Oh, Natalie! How can you say that? Look at the photos, the size of these bites compared to that one, the one on her throat—that’s him, your John Doe. *He* did that.”

Natalie pulled the gooseneck lamp down a little closer to the photos, feeling cold. *Oh, God*, she thought blankly as she stared at the sunburst bite, definitely larger than the others. *How did I miss it?*

Grace had another shocker: “And look at the jaw size. Your John Doe #2 is a *Jane*—it’s a woman.”

Natalie stared dry-mouthed, trying to assimilate it all. A woman? A *woman* could do this? To another woman? The dozens of wounds, the terrible mutilation? She clung to one hope: “So . . . you’re saying *she’s* the killer, not him? The tox levels . . . maybe he didn’t know what he was doing.”

“Sure, he was high as a kite,” Grace agreed, mouth twisting downward. “But that’s no excuse, not for this. He was going for blood.”

Grace pushed the photo towards her, letting it speak for itself. The bite on the dead girl’s throat was deep and savage, damning evidence. No jury would accept a diminished capacity plea from Vachon, stoned or not. How could they, when Natalie herself couldn’t?

* * *

Joe Reese had no idea why one of his people could have completely lost all his marbles for a few minutes, but Constable Marron had. “Some woman shows up claiming to be Vetter’s sister, no ID, no nothing, and you just hand over her home address and phone number?”

Marron didn’t remember doing it, couldn’t even remember the woman at all. He just shook his head, helpless, sick inside. If it hadn’t been for one of Reese’s fruitless trips to the water cooler, no one would have even known.

“Get a sketch artist down here ASAP,” Reese barked. “At least I remember what she looked like, even if you don’t!”

12

“We’re going to the roadhouse,
we’re going to have a real good time . . .”

Vachon looked round the packed nightclub, feeling at home with his guitars beside him, loud music pounding up through the floor and into his veins, and a bottle of red wine close at hand. He half-expected Lacroix to ooze in and begin broadcasting. He also half-expected Urs to appear. That prospect filled him with anticipation and dread, not knowing whether she’d be angry or amused to find him floating around loose in the world.

He’d seriously misjudged Urs. Figured that out too late, of course. Seriously hurt her, too. He was paying for that one. Whether she’d let him off alive or not . . . he didn’t know. Some part of him knew that should scare him, but he wasn’t tracking well enough to be scared. Or much else.

How did it get this bad? he wondered, staring out across the dance floor, lost. He wished the sun was up, that he was standing in it, letting its rays wash over him. Hot. Golden. She couldn’t come near him if he was in the sun. Or maybe she was the sun. He kept getting them confused in his head.

"How you doin', Cowboy?" Randy had to lean in close and shout to make himself heard.

"Great," Vachon replied with a tired smile. He'd dozed off earlier, on the way from Randy's mom's place to the club, the first undisturbed sleep he'd had in days. Urs made sure he was too strung out just before daylight to sleep before she came in, and once he was stoned, he was closer to passed out than asleep. The T&Rs he popped like candy throughout the day kept him on a kind of balance until she got back and the cycle started all over again.

Tonight, that balance was way off. Unbeknownst to Randy, Vachon had run into an old friend while in the washroom: another guitar player from Grossman's, the blues bar. "Got some primo stuff, here, Cowboy," the man slurred. "You gotta have just a little taste . . ."

The way his back teeth ached, his eyes feeling like they were ready to jump out of his head, Vachon had to agree: it was definitely primo, even if it wasn't his usual brand. Urs kept him mellow with China white, the synthetic heroin Grace's toxicology screens had found; what Marcus had was straight cocaine, pure and simple. No mellow. No doze. Just lots of crackling energy, and a false sense of invulnerability. Tonight, he could do anything he wanted.

The keyboard player on stage waved them up, and Randy sprang to his feet like an eager dog. "Come on, Cowboy!" he cried, his voice breaking keys like a teenager's.

Vachon quickly drained the wineglass, grimacing at the sharp bite of the cheap Canadian house red. It was wonderful. Just like his father's back home: raw, grapey, full of lust and exuberance and a warm earthy tang, picked too young.

It was still early, quarter past nine, the house band just killing time. "Whadd'ya wanna play?" the bald drummer shouted as they plugged in.

Randy was about to say something, but Vachon beat him to it: "Doors," he said, settling himself on a stool, the boosted acoustic on his lap. Took a breath, flexing his fingers—*Can I do this?* he wondered as the drummer cried "Which *one*?"—and jumped straight into the unmistakable opening riff for "Roadhouse Blues."

There was a mike in front of him. He wondered if it was on; started singing, Randy coming in right behind him in a clear tenor harmony, and found out it was. "Keep your eyes upon the road, your hands upon the wheel. We're goin' to the roadhouse, we're gonna have a real . . . good time!" He didn't have a great voice, but it didn't take much to sing ol' Jimbo's songs. Just energy, and being on stage gave him plenty of that.

He'd forgotten how good this felt, playing in front of a crowd. Absorbing their incredible, beating energy, their shouted approval and off-key singing along. He felt a hand briefly touch his shoulder, Randy wordlessly thanking him for not blowing it, and he smiled, letting go of everything but the music.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick was managing to keep his distance from Tracy reasonably well up to the point where they reached the nightclub. Word must have slipped out that the popular band was coming over after their show at the Sky Dome, because there were maybe a couple hundred young Hip fans in a noisy clump outside the door. Tracy flashed her badge, parting the crowd like Moses, and Nick held his breath, keeping his eyes down as they squeezed through.

"Metro Police, Detective Vetter—" Tracy said to the doorman, and again the sea parted. She was just starting to say something to Nick: "Maybe you should take the left side and I'll—" when she stopped dead in her tracks.

Nick barely caught himself from bumping into her. Then he saw what she was staring at: Vachon, up on the small stage. His hopes sagged. They'd have no chance of approaching him until the set was over, not unless they wanted to cause a scene. "Let's head over this side—" Nick suggested, pointing to the far left of the stage, close but out of Vachon's line of sight. As they squeezed up to a standing-room-only bar, Nick realized it wouldn't have made any difference if they'd been sitting dead center in front of the stage: Vachon was oblivious to anyone but the musicians, and he only barely noticed them.

"That must be Randy," Tracy shouted, pointing to the young bass player who kept patting Vachon on the shoulder.

Nick scanned the crowd, looking for Urs. Could she sense where Vachon was? Could she track him from the blood connection, or would they be lucky and buy a couple hours? Where did she go at night? For the first time in two hours, he suddenly thought of Natalie. He patted at his coat pockets, but neither his beeper nor his cell phone were there, either Urs or Lacroix having decided he didn't need them. "Tracy, give me your phone," he shouted at his partner. "I've got to call Nat."

Wordlessly, she dug her phone out of her shoulder bag, her eyes never leaving the stage. "I'll be right back," Nick told her. "Five minutes, no more."

No reaction. *Great*, he thought, plucking the phone gingerly out of her hand without touching her fingers. *There's no way she's going to hold up*. The first call he made was to Joe Reese, to request backup at the club as soon as possible. He'd rather risk a riot than try to handle the situation on his own, his nerves in their raw, newborn vampire state; Tracy was too close to the situation to be trusted not to fall apart. If they were lucky, he thought with grim humor, Urs would show her hand too early, exposing herself for a vampire, and the Enforcers would drop out of the sky and spike her to the dance floor.

13

"The future's uncertain
and the end is always near . . ."

Natalie was still staring at the bite photos when the phone rang. She picked it up, numb with lack of sleep. "Lambert."

"Nat, it's me. I'm all right."

For a moment she froze, not believing the voice was real. "Nick?"

Distant, heavy music throbbed in the background. "I'm all right," he said again.

"What happened?" she cried, not sure if she should burst into tears or laughter. "Where have you been? Why didn't you call?"

"I'm all right," he said for the third time, and warning bells began to clamor in her head. "I'm with Tracy at the El Mocambo—a nightclub. We found Vachon. I called for backup."

"Where have you been?" she said again, the receiver slippery in her hand. "Nick, you sound strange—what's wrong?"

There was a silence—silence from him, a roar from the crowd as new music started—and later Natalie realized she knew the truth long before he replied, his voice heavy: "Nothing's wrong. It's just . . ." His voice faded, as if he'd put his hand over the speaker.

"Why didn't you call? Nick, they found the car, Vachon's jacket—there was blood on the seat—"

"Nat . . . I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do. There was nothing he could do except . . . what he did."

"Who?" Her face was wet; she was crying, she realized. *Please don't say it*, she silently begged him. *Please, not that.*

"Lacroix." The word was a sigh. "I'm sorry. Nat . . . I'm sorry." Then there was silence, the connection broken.

* * *

By the time Nick squeezed his way back to where Tracy was—stopping briefly in the washroom to gulp down the last bottle of blood—Jojo and Beau had taken over for the house drummer and singer. Vachon and Randy had been pushed back to the far right side of the stage to make room, and Nick saw an opportunity.

"Tracy." He tapped her on the shoulder to get her attention. "I think we can—"

"Why didn't you tell me?" she said, sounding much like Natalie had on the phone. Stretched near to breaking. Close to tears. "Look at him, Nick—he looks terrible!"

"I know." What could he say? It was true.

"Did he—" She struggled to get the words out and Nick was praying she wouldn't ask *Did he do it?* because he didn't know how to tell her any more lies. "Did he even know who you were?"

He glanced away. "No."

"What are we going to do?" she asked. "Nick, what if he doesn't know me? If she's got him so confused, so out of it, he might not. How will he know he can trust us?"

"Tracy," he said gently. "There's nowhere he can run. Now look—I called for backup, and they should be here any minute. If we go round to the back, there—maybe catch Jojo's eye, get him to get Vachon off the stage, we can get him out quietly. Take him to a safe house."

"He needs to be in a hospital," she said, and he nodded, wishing he could take her hands in his, hold her, something, anything to get her to stop shaking. If she broke down now, if Vachon looked over, saw her—

Keeping his teeth tightly clenched, Nick reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. It was like sticking it into a bag full of broken glass, her emotion jumping out at him through her skin, her jacket, ripping through his fingers, up his arm and straight into his brain. A guttural sound escaped him, lost in the crowd noise, and he willed himself not to react. Not to let himself go.

Tracy looked up at him, eyes full of tears, mouth soft and trembling, and he had to close his eyes. "Get hold of yourself," he said, sounding angry, not meaning to.

She blinked rapidly, blushing. "Sorry—" Blew her nose on the cocktail napkin, straightened her shoulders as she sat up. Then she gave him an appraising look. "Are *you* going to be okay, Nick?"

He let go of her shoulder. "I think so." Movement from the doorway caught his eye. A mass of people moving forward, lots of noise. "Great. The headliners are early. Where the hell's our backup?"

Tracy grabbed his wrist without thinking, sending a hot shower of sparks up his arm. "They're getting ready to move!"

She was right: the house band was making motions at Jojo, trying to get him to wind up his song. But he stubbornly ignored them, cheated out of his full set by the headline band arriving early, and he continued to yowl into the microphone. Someone on the side of the stage caught Randy's eye, and he in turn bent over Vachon, passing the message along.

As soon as Nick saw Vachon nod, he and Tracy started moving towards the side of the stage. "You'd better stay behind me," he warned. "Not recognizing me is one thing, but you . . ."

"Okay." Tracy followed, eyes never leaving Vachon.

They were within ten feet of him when the song ended. "Let's have a big hand for these guys," Gord Downie, the lead singer shouted to the crowd. "We'll bring 'em back when we take a break, what do you say?"

Randy was grinning enthusiastically, waving to the crowd. Jojo was still grumbling, but trying to be gracious. Beau, the drummer, turned and said, "Hey, it's those cops," just as Nick was reaching for Vachon's arm.

Vachon's head came up, eyes wide. A ghost seeing a ghost. As Nick's hand closed on his arm, he tried to wrench himself away, desperately looking for an escape. "It's okay, Cowboy," Nick said, trying to keep his expression neutral, not at all easy with the young man's panic stabbing him, sharper and brighter than Tracy's brief touch had been. "We're going to help you."

Someone jostled him, probably some of the fans jockeying for a better position, and he knew by the way the remaining bit of color drained from Vachon's face that he'd caught a glimpse of Tracy behind him. Confirmation was the guitar suddenly swinging towards Nick's head. He ducked, losing his grip momentarily—and Vachon twisted away, ducking and disappearing into the crush at the front of the small stage. "Take the side exit!" Nick shouted to Tracy. "I'll try to head him off towards you!"

As bodies and arms and knees and warm breath hit him from all sides, Nick felt the vampire rising up in a rush. The dark club reddened, the bass and drum fading into a thousand heartbeats. Keeping his head down, he opened his mouth, sucking in the scents, the tastes, searching for Vachon. He wasn't hard to pick out, not with his heart pumping, the sharp smell of cocaine sweat like a bright flag. He was heading for the hallway, the washrooms, maybe an alley door, a window—

The fist came out of nowhere, moving too fast to be human, a vicious uppercut that drove his half-extended fangs into his lower lip, drawing blood. "You should have stayed out of this!" a voice hissed in his ear.

Urs glared at him, eyes like yellow razors, fangs bared. If the club hadn't been so dark, if the focus of everyone in the club hadn't been on the band on stage, it would have been impossible to hide his instantaneous reaction. But before he could launch himself at her, she'd grabbed a young man beside her and shoved him with such force into the crowd that half a dozen bodies went sprawling. "Oh, my God, he's got a *gun*!" Urs shrieked, grinning at Nick as everyone within the sound of her voice reacted at once, scattering, some throwing themselves on the floor, some bolting one way, some the other. And she was gone.

"Damn it!" Nick hissed, covering his mouth with his hand so no one would see his teeth as he ducked through the crowd in the direction Vachon had gone. If he could follow him by scent, so could Urs.

❑❑❑❑❑

Panic at the realization Nick was a cop—not to mention seeing Tracy and having it all fall into place—overrode the cocaine, propelling Vachon toward the back door at breakneck speed. "Hey, Cowboy—!" somebody called as he went racing toward the hallway, and he saw his salvation in the grinning moon face of the guitarist he'd been snorting coke with earlier.

"Marcus!" he gasped. "Man, am I glad to see you!"

"Where you going in such a rush, Cowboy? How's about another little toot?"

"No time," Vachon cut him off. "You got a car, Marcus? I got cops on me, gotta get outta here *now*!"

Marcus showed his teeth in a huge smile. "Well, let's *go* then!" Gave Vachon a tug in the opposite direction when he headed for the hallway. "No—my wheels're out front—This way."

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick caught sight of Urs hurrying down the hallway, hardly bothering to hide her angry impatience or her fierce eyes. Anyone who got in her way was slammed aside; Nick followed a trail of bruises to the parking lot, and with a swift glance to see if anyone was watching, he lifted off just seconds after she did.

He gave her to a count of twenty, lagging behind just long enough to see that she was following a nondescript blue Buick, and then hit her with a burst of speed, dropping out of the sky and ramming her in midair.

They plummeted down, tumbling head over heels, for ten or fifteen feet before Urs managed to wrench free, hissing like a snake. She struck out at him, wild, not noticing or caring that all he was doing was evading her, delaying her. Until it was too late. By the time Nick abruptly wheeled, diving past her and flying back towards the nightclub, the blue Buick was long gone, Vachon's scent trail vanished with it.

14

". . . the days are bright and filled with pain . . .
enclose me in your gentle rain . . ."

Nick and Urs may have lost track of the Buick, but Tracy hadn't. She'd seen the frantic exchange between Vachon and the big moon-faced man, and had followed them. One good thing about driving a nice, safe sedan, she reflected as she gunned it past a Safeway truck on a late-night haul, was that it was completely nondescript. She doubted Vachon even remembered what color her car was, let alone the make.

By the time they reached the warehouse district, Tracy knew where they were headed and took a chance, cutting through a few alleys so she could be waiting at the red brick warehouse Nick had pointed out. The Buick finally pulled over—not ten feet from where they'd found Nick's abandoned Caddy—and Tracy watched with relief as Vachon let himself out.

In the shadows of the building's doorway, she heard Vachon's "Thanks, man. I owe you one."

"No, problem, Cowboy," was the answering chuckle, and the Buick pulled away, tooling happily down the middle of the road.

For a moment, Vachon just stood in the street, not moving. As if all his momentum had been bled away. Then with an fruitless rake at his wild hair, he started toward the doorway. When he was two feet away, Tracy stepped out of the shadows.

His reaction wasn't at all what she expected—although later, she realized, she'd had no idea what he'd do when he saw her. He froze, breath choked off in his throat, his eyes staring—and then he sagged as he recognized her. "Why are you here?" he asked, his voice raw. "I didn't want you to see me—"

"Vachon—"

Her fingertips touched his arm and he flinched away as if she'd slapped him. "Don't—!"

Anger and sorrow lumped in her throat. "What's she *done* to you?" she whispered. "Oh, Vachon . . .!"

He still kept his face averted. "There's nothing you can do. Just go. Please. Just . . . it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter?" She grabbed his arm, forcing him to look at her. "After everything we had? It doesn't matter that she's killing you?"

Close up, she could see his haggard exhaustion. He was swaying on his feet, barely able to stay upright. "There's nothing you can do," he started to say again, but his eyes started to roll, and Tracy quickly slipped her arm round him.

"Come on," she said, half-carrying him. "My car's just over here."

A spark of the old Vachon flickered when he spotted it. "Hey, it's the steel-reinforced airbag."

"Yeah," she grinned. "Put your seatbelt on."

❑❑❑❑❑

She knew she should take him to a hospital, even got within five blocks of one before she decided it would be safer to keep Vachon under wraps until she could talk to Nick.

He was asleep, collapsed like a worn-out child, face pressed against the window, steam from his breath obscuring the glass. She hated to disturb him, hated it even more when her touch made him thrash out of sleep in panic, hands raised to keep her away. Not her, she knew, but Urs.

"It's just me," she said gently, pulling his hands down, squeezing them in hers to reassure him. "Vachon. It's me. It's okay."

As soon as they were safely inside the apartment, the deadbolt locked, the chain on the door, she called for a patrol car to be posted out front, and for an officer to watch the hallway. "And tell Knight to get over here as soon as possible," she added. He wasn't carrying his cell, she remembered uncomfortably. Unless he was in the Caddy, he'd never hear the 81-Kilo call.

When she hung up, she turned to find Vachon watching her. "It won't make any difference," he said hopelessly. "She'll still find me."

"You're getting in the shower," she said, prodding him down the hall. "You stink."

"I can do this," he protested as she followed him into the bathroom.

"I was just getting you some towels." Habit—and the dozens of showers they'd taken together—made her forget things had changed. Embarrassed, she quickly left him alone.

A buzz at the intercom took her attention; the patrol car was in place in front of the building, and two more officers were on their way up. Tracy dragged two of her dining room chairs into the hallway for them, and put on a pot of coffee. It was barely eleven. Hours to go before the sun came up. She shivered. A hotel would have been a smarter alternative, but hindsight was no help. They were here, Vachon was in the shower, four men were watching the doors, Nick should be here soon—it would have to be enough.

Once she had the two officers set up with coffee, she went back down the hall to the bathroom, listening to see if Vachon was still in the shower. The water was still running; she decided she could slip some clean clothes in—some of his things he'd dumped in her laundry hamper months ago and promptly forgotten—without him even knowing she'd been in the room.

But as she eased the door open, she knew something was wrong. It was the absence of sound that frightened her: through the clear plastic curtain, she could see Vachon was there, that the water was running, but he wasn't moving. Quickly setting the clothes down, she tapped on the bathroom door, calling, "Vachon? Are you okay?"

No reply. She cautiously inched the curtain open. "Vachon?"

He was leaning against the tile wall. Not moving. Face up tilted, eyes closed, the water beating in a steady stream against his shoulder and chest, running down his belly, his legs. The first thing that struck her was how thin he was. The second was the horrific number of swollen, angry bites tattooing his neck, his arms, his chest. There were even a few on his upper thighs, the red punctures as vivid and ugly as the track marks that ran from inner elbow to wrist on both his arms.

With a jolt, Tracy suddenly realized she'd never thought to see if he had any drugs on him. A quick rummage through his grubby jeans discovered the nearly-empty pill bottle. She tucked it in her pocket, wishing she'd thought to look earlier—had he taken any since he got here?

Another try: "Vachon—are you okay?"

His eyelids flickered, barely lifting. Only white showed. No reply. Tracy stood watching him another minute then, with a sigh, started undressing.

He shied away from her with a wordless protest, backing into the corner of the tub as she approached him with a handful of shampoo. "Stop it," she told him, maneuvering herself behind him so she could reach his head. "Just relax, will you? All I'm trying to do is wash your hair."

Something—maybe the familiar smell of the shampoo—triggered a response. "Tracy?"

She managed to get her hands on his wet hair and start working up a lather. "Yeah, it's me. Just relax and let me do this, okay?"

A sigh. ". . . okay . . ." He sagged against her, letting his head rest against her shoulder. "Smells like bananas . . ."

"Close your mouth," she warned him a few moments later. "I'm going to rinse your hair." It was easiest to just let him lean against her chest and shuffle them both under the hot stream of water. Banana suds rolled down his shoulders and over her breasts, trickling between their tight-pressed bodies. She reached for the soap, feeling herself blush as she started rubbing it over his chest, down his arms.

As she soaped his belly, he groaned, arching back against her. "Tracy . . ." She swallowed the knot in her throat, suddenly breathless. *Don't,* she told herself, the hand holding the soap moving mechanically, scrubbing his flanks, his thighs, avoiding his groin. It was obvious by the way that he was trembling that he was hard. With an effort, she broke the contact between them. He made a soft protesting sound as she moved away.

"I have to do your back," she said. Soaping quickly, trying to be gentle around the bruises and bites, she quickly scrubbed him, all the way down to his thighs. "Okay, time to rinse."

He turned to face her, and her knees went watery. As his eyes met hers, all pupil, she thought she'd never seen a man look so completely and utterly vulnerable, teetering on the edge, wanting to just let go but so afraid, so afraid . . .!

It didn't matter how thin he was, how bruised and marked and pale; in her eyes he was beautiful. "I can't do this," he said, his voice barely audible.

His body said otherwise. So did his face, his eyes, his mouth . . . "You don't have to," she gently told him. "You don't have to do anything, Vachon."

He couldn't look at her. Had to put one hand on the wet tile wall, dizzy. "You don't understand . . ."

"You don't have to do anything," Tracy said again, embarrassed for him, for herself. She reached for the door. "This was a really bad idea. I'm sorry. I just wanted—"

"Tracy—" She turned to meet his eyes, worried, hopeful, dreading what he might say. "Don't go. Stay with me . . ."

She was hugging him fiercely before the words were out. "I've missed you so much—!"

One hand rose to cup her breast, thumb ghosting over her soft nipple, making it pucker and rise in quick response. Then he put his hands on the back of her head, pulling her even closer, belly to belly, to kiss her long and deep. "Me, too . . ."

Never get enough of that soft mouth, that all-enveloping can't-catch-your-breath way he kissed her. Like it had been forever since he'd kissed anyone, and wanted to catch up all in one night, one hour, right now, right now—!

Her hand went blindly down, closing round him, making him gasp. Slowly, she stroked him, the water and soap and heat of them making him moan against her mouth. His hands covered her slippery breasts, his mouth on her cheek, her throat, moving down until he found her nipple. His tongue tickled it momentarily, teasing, and then he closed his mouth on it, sucking hard the way she liked it when she was really aroused. She heard herself whimper, her legs shaking. Wanting him so much . . .! His hand went between her legs, fingers rubbing, stroking until she was weeping.

"Kiss me again—" she said, her voice breaking. "Oh, God, I missed you—!"

"Turn around—" he said breathlessly.

She braced herself against the wall, heart pounding crazily. He was a smooth velvet wedge, pushing, sliding inside, deep inside. The first waves hit her seconds later, rippling and shivering through her like a deep, beating pulse. She moaned, helpless, rapt, her wet face pressed against the tiles as the water splashed down on them.

A few blank seconds passed, lost in water and steam and Vachon's slippery body moving against hers, his hands on her breasts, so good, so good . . . She could tell by the way he hesitated, seeming to swell inside her, that he was about to come. She couldn't stop herself from tensing, expecting the exquisite, icy stab of his teeth—

And suddenly he was pushing her away, almost stumbling as he retreated to the opposite end of the tub. And sobbing, arms wrapped tightly round himself, shoulders hunched, sobbing like a child. She hesitantly moved toward him, trying to catch what he was saying: "I can't. I can't." Over and over again. Like the skip of a needle on an old record. "Don't make me do this. I can't. I can't."

"Vachon," she said gently, afraid to touch him for fear of upsetting him even more. "Vachon, shh, it's okay. It's okay." Mentally, she was kicking herself. Stupid? That didn't even come close to describing how asinine getting in the shower with him was!

Using tentative little fingertip pushes, she eased him back under the full blast of the shower to let the cooling water course over him. It seemed to take forever, but he finally blinked and drew a surprised breath, shuddering, and focused on her.

"Tracy?" Staring at her breasts. Not believing his eyes. "What . . .?"

"It's okay. Just . . . forget it, okay? Come on, let's get out of here, dry off."

15

"My wild love is crazy, she screams like a bird.
She moans like a cat when she wants to be heard . . ."

He was shivering as he stepped out of the shower, every inch of him covered in gooseflesh. Tracy whisked a towel over herself quickly, threw on her robe to soak up what the towel had missed, and helped him dry off and get dressed.

Blue jeans for a change instead of black, baggy on him now, the waist drooping. Short-sleeved T-shirt too revealing, showing too many bruises—Tracy quickly dug out an old sweater, a dark green one she'd borrowed from her father about ten years back and never got round to returning. It was soft and shapeless, but warm. "That's better," Tracy said brightly. "Are you hungry?"

He kept looking at her as if he didn't believe she was real. As if she'd vanish if he glanced away even for a second. "No . . . yeah. I guess."

It occurred to her that nothing was the same as it used to be. "What . . . do you like?" she asked, suddenly shy. She'd never seen him eat before. At least not . . . food.

He colored slightly, maybe thinking the same thing. Maybe still thinking about what they'd been doing in the shower. What they hadn't quite done. He shrugged. "Anything. —Not eggs. I never liked eggs. Before."

As she started into the kitchen she thought suddenly of the two officers patiently sitting outside her door, their coffee cups long since empty, probably bored half to death. Grabbing the pot, she said to Vachon, "I'll be right back."

"Okay . . ." He stretched out as best he could on the loveseat ("this pathetic excuse for a sofa" he used to complain, she thought with a smile), and his eyes fell closed. She slipped the lock and opened the apartment door.

"Thought you guys could use some—"

The floor did a slow tilt as she stared at the carnage in the hallway. The two officers were dead, their heads crushed and bleeding as if they'd been smashed together with incredible force. One still had the handle of his coffee cup—broken—hooked round his finger. Both of them had twin puncture wounds at the throat. Bites. Tracy backed into the apartment, heart nearly leaping out of her chest, and slammed the door, locking it with shaking hands.

The noise brought Vachon out of his doze with a start. "What? What is it?"

"She's here," Tracy whispered, eyes scanning the apartment, the windows, as she flipped open her purse, pulled out her gun.

"She—" Vachon's eyes went wide as he stared at the gun. "That won't stop her."

"It'll slow her down," Tracy said between clenched teeth. A bullet in the head had damn near killed Nick when he was still a vampire—a full clip from the semi-automatic Glock should at least buy them some time. Her palms were sweating.

She edged toward the phone, eyes constantly sweeping from the apartment door to the windows. "The bathroom—" she told Vachon as she clamped the receiver between her ear and shoulder and punched the buttons. "No windows—"

Vachon was halfway to his feet when the patio door blew in, glass spraying everywhere. Tracy got off four or five blind shots, her face stinging. "Vachon!" she shouted, trying to blink away the blood running in her eyes, afraid to shoot again until she could safely see where he was. "Vachon!"

There was a moan from behind her. She spun, everything a haze of red, her gun still locked at shoulder height, half a pound of pressure on the trigger—and froze.

Urs, eyes as red as blood, held Vachon in front of her like a shield. One hand was twisted in his hair, pulling his head back so the tendons and veins in his neck stood out like wires. The other pressed the razor length of a long shard of glass against his throat. A trickle of blood leaked down into the neckband of the sweater, turning it black. "Put the gun down or he dies," Urs growled. "Now!"

"Don't do it," Vachon gasped. "She won't kill me—"

The glass blade cut deeper, the trickle increasing to a stream. "Won't I?" Urs crooned, arching him even further back so she could lap at the blood. Without warning, she bit down, driving her fangs into his throat. Vachon uttered a strangled cry, his entire body convulsing.

"No!" Tracy cried, tossing the gun across the room. "Don't! Please—!"

Urs lifted her head, grinning. Blood ran down her chin. Vachon hug limp in her grasp, his face ashen, eyes glassy with pain. She gave him a vicious shake, slapping him to bring him around. "Come on, Javier—" she chuckled. "You don't want to miss this, do you? We've been waiting for this for a long time, haven't we? You and your beloved Tracy. And me."

Tracy didn't miss the way Urs' head suddenly turned, as if she heard something in the distance. Too far away for human ears to catch. Sirens? *Please, God*—she thought desperately. *Please let it be Nick—!*

"What do you want?" Tracy asked, hoping to buy time. "You've got him, Urs. I don't. What more do you want?"

"I don't have him!" the vampire hissed. "I never did! All those years together, and I never had him, not like you did."

Vachon struck out at her, his face twisted in helpless rage. She slapped him again, a swift reminder of who was in control. The short blow snapped his head back, dropping him like a stone. Urs left him sprawled on the floor, and advanced toward Tracy, pausing only to retrieve the bloody shard of glass.

"Wait!" Vachon cried. "Urs, wait!"

They both turned to him, Urs impatient, bloody-eyed. "What?" she hissed. " 'Don't kill her,' Javier? Oh, I won't—not yet."

"I'll do what you want!" he cried, his voice breaking. He'd managed to get to his knees, but Tracy could see by the way his eyes couldn't seem to focus that he barely knew where he was. His lip was split from Urs' last careless slap, but it wasn't bleeding; she'd drained so much of him, there was no blood left to spare. "Please, Urs—!" he begged. "I swear I will—everything. Everything. If you let her go."

"Everything." She spit the word at him. "Like last time, Javier? You'd do it, you said. All of it. But you know what, Javier? I didn't trust you, and I still don't."

"Don't listen to her, Tracy," Vachon warned.

Urs wasn't paying attention to Tracy, just Vachon. "Don't you remember what you did to her, thinking she was me? That perfect little Tracy-doll. You thought it was me, you bastard. Remember now?"

Vachon stared at her, his mouth working, no sound coming out. He started to shake his head, blinking. "No. It was you. I *know* it was you. It had to be!"

"It wasn't," Urs said with a smug toss of her curls. "And you know what you did, don't you, Javier? She was screaming, screaming and begging you not to hurt her and you still did. You just thought it was me. But now you know the truth."

"No . . ." His face was stark white, sick. "It was you! I was with *you*!"

Another sharp glance at the window—Tracy thought she could hear it now, too: the wail of approaching sirens. "So. You've made promises to me before, Javier," Urs said softly. She turned to Tracy, long teeth bared. "Why should I believe you this time?"

He tried to get to his feet, stumbled. Stubbornly tried again, dragging himself up by clinging to the loveseat. He still couldn't make it past his knees.

"Then let me do it, Urs. Give me the glass. Let me prove it to you. I'll do it. Everything you want." His eyes met Tracy's, haunted. Trying to tell her something.

Urs' red glare went from one to the other, weighing it. Then she darted across the room, grabbing Tracy and thrusting her down in front of Vachon. "Fine," she said sweetly, putting the blade of glass in his hand. "Show me, Javier. Show me what you'll do for me."

This couldn't be happening—Vachon was going to save her from Urs—but she was still going to die? By *his* hand? "Vachon . . ." The word came out a dry whisper.

"You told me I'd never hurt you," he said, his voice breaking. Then in a whisper, as he pretended to wipe the blood off his mouth: "When I do it, *run*—"

The shard of glass glittered in his hand, catching the light from the kitchen. Tracy couldn't seem to take a breath. How could she run if he cut her? How could she do anything?

"I'm sorry—" He tipped her head back, gently. As he kissed her, a tear splashed on her face, or a drop of blood. "Please—don't watch—"

The glass flashed toward his throat and Tracy grabbed frantically at his arm, trying to stop him. "Vachon, *no*!"

Urs was there at the same time, easily snatching the shard of glass out of his hand. "Your timing was always the pits, Javier," she sighed.

The sirens were right outside the building now, car doors slamming, shouts—

"Next time, darling Tracy" Urs promised, her hand snaking out to grab Tracy's chin, "we won't run out of time." Laughing, she held her still while she ran her tongue up Tracy's cheek in a slow, wet kiss. Then she gave her a playful slap that sent her spinning into the opposite wall. Tracy struck her head, her shoulder, and slid to the floor, the room whirling. Something sharp stabbed her every time she tried to draw a breath. When she could see past the whirling red-and-black spots, Urs and Vachon had vanished into the night.

The only sound in the room was her labored breathing. Broken glass littered the rug. Blood was everywhere, spatters from the flying glass, small pools where Vachon had been. Something warm was running down her forehead. There was a rushing sound behind her, coming through the shattered patio doors, and she dove for her gun with a breathless gasp, her lungs on fire.

"Tracy, it's me! It's me, Nick!" He held her at arm's length, grimacing as his gaze swept over her. "What happened? Are you all right?"

"It's Urs—"

"I know. Stay still—" He reached out, face taut, and plucked something from her forehead: a long sliver of glass embedded there. There was a dangerously tawny ring around the irises of his eyes. "Where is she now?"

Tracy nodded toward the blowing curtains. "Gone. She took him, Nick. Oh, God, if you'd seen her—!"

"I'll find them," he promised, giving her a quick, careful hug as footsteps pounded down the hallway towards the apartment. "I swear to you, I'll find them."

Then he was gone too, leaving her to deal with the human things, the questions, the lies, the bodies and blood and death outside her door.

16

". . . bodies confused . . .
memories misused . . ."

It was a mess. Joe Reese came, and Natalie. Even her father showed up, all of them meaning well but none of them making her feel any better about what had happened.

What had almost happened. Her hand scrubbed at her cheek again, trying to erase the memory of Urs' tongue, and Natalie quickly reached to stop her. "Leave it," she said firmly. "You've pulled that dressing off twice now."

Why the hell did everybody keep trying to tell her things without saying them? Even Natalie was doing it. "Nick was here," she told her, guessing that was what it was about. She couldn't draw a complete breath, her chest aching: broken ribs, the paramedics had said. "Just after Urs—hauled Vachon away, and the—cavalry arrived. He's doing okay. I guess."

"You 'guess'?" Natalie asked in a strained whisper. "What's that supposed to mean? He didn't bite you when he came in? He's going to call me soon and let me know if he's ever coming home?"

"I don't know," Tracy said wearily, her mind on Vachon. Nothing but Vachon. Nick was fine, would be fine in an hour, a day, a week. Vachon could already be dead. She felt her face twist, tears starting again, and she gave herself a vicious mental pinch to stop it. She was no good to him if she just fell apart; she had to keep thinking, keep trying to figure out where Urs would take him, what she'd do next.

I'll do it. Everything you want.

What *did* Urs want from him? Not just killing her—that would have only been his "proof" he was giving in. Tracy rubbed her clenched fist against her temple, stuck. Sex? Could it be that simple? It made a little more sense of his hopeless "I can't. I can't." Something had been wrong, but what?

"You have the warehouse under surveillance?" she asked Joe Reese.

"Inside and out," he assured her. "Nobody's getting by them."

Nobody but a flying woman with a hell of an attitude. "What are these pills you gave me?" she asked the paramedic who was hovering nearby, still making noises about broken ribs and stitches.

"Just Valium," he said.

Oh, yeah. That was all she needed. "No thanks," she said, handing the blue tablets back. She didn't think she'd be able to take anything, even an aspirin, after seeing Vachon.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" Joe Reese protested as Tracy started to rise from the loveseat, waving the paramedic and Natalie away. "You're not going anywhere, Vetter!"

Her father jumped in then, too, all paternal and don't-worry-your-pretty-little-head-about-it-Button patronizing. "That's right, sweetheart . . ."

"I'd be safer in a church," Tracy muttered breathlessly. Her chest felt like someone had taken a baseball bat to her.

"Look," Natalie said reasonably, "you can't *breathe*, Tracy. You have a splintered rib trying to jab its way into your lung as we speak. There's no way in hell you're going anywhere but the hospital. You've got to leave this to Nick . . . and the rest of the department to deal with."

There was the barest hesitation before "and the rest of the department" and Tracy nodded. She was right. "Okay—"

Natalie smiled. "I see some of your partner's good sense and respect for authority has worn off on you," she said, then lowered her voice so Reese and the others wouldn't overhear. "Do you have any idea where to look for them?"

"Not yet," Tracy whispered back. "But you're right—we're going to need a bigger—*boat*. Can you get your hands on—" Stop for a breath. Blink away tears of pain. "—some of those—Teflon-coated 'cop-killers'—that nearly stopped Nick? Bring them—to the hospital."

"You think she'll come after you?" Natalie asked.

"Oh, yeah." Tracy nodded as vigorously as she could. She was beginning to think Valium wasn't such a bad idea. Too bad Vachon hadn't left any of his "little helpers" in the pill bottle she'd confiscated while he was in the shower. "She'll come." An idea occurred to her. "One more thing . . ."

Natalie listened to the request, then shrugged. "It can't hurt." Stepping over the Ident man hunched over the pools of blood on Tracy's rug, she headed into the bedroom to see if she could find the rosary Tracy had buried in her never-wear drawer shortly after first meeting Vachon. It was a delicate thing, old enough to have belonged to her grandmother, Natalie thought as she lifted it out of its potpourri-scented wrapping. No plastic or pot metal: the beads looked like real pearls, creamy with a pinkish tinge. The chain was a little tarnished, real silver.

"This what you wanted?" She passed it with sleight of hand to Tracy, who slipped it over her head.

"Hope the books are right about this," Tracy tried to joke. She gave the crucifix a little squeeze for good luck before she dropped it down her sweatshirt.

Natalie rolled her eyes, thinking of a few memorable times she'd seen Nick in a not-so-pleasant encounter with a cross. "Just keep it out of sight when you-know-who's around," she nodded, "or you might find out just how right they are!"

* * *

Urs squatted beside the still, white figure on the bed, worried. "Come on, Javier," she pleaded. "I didn't take that much—you should be okay."

But he wasn't. She could hear the labored way his heart was beating, could feel how cold and clammy his skin was even compared to hers. An hour ago she would have been angry, sure that he was just trying to cheat her out of the bittersweet revenge she'd so carefully planned. But him dying before it was finished wasn't part of that plan. He'd promised he'd give her what she wanted, and she'd get it.

Even if it meant giving him up again for a while. She smiled, petting his hand, holding it when he tried to pull away. Oh, yes . . . It would be perfect. Let them think she'd given up, that they'd won.

She tucked the blood-speckled sheets round him, bundling him securely. "I'll show you how much I love you, Javier," she murmured as she carried him tenderly to the window, pushed open the shutters with her shoulder. "I'll give you back to her. You'll like that, won't you?"

Holding him tightly against her chest, carrying him like a child, she lifted silently into the night sky.

* * *

It took nearly five hours before the news reached Joe Reese that one of the suspects in the serial murder case had been admitted to Toronto General. When he got there, he found Nick was already there. It was a toss up as to who was more pale: the man in the dark turquoise vinyl-covered chair, or the near-corpse handcuffed to the bed. The cuffs were overkill. This guy wasn't going anywhere but the morgue, by the look of him.

Nick raised his head as Reese came into the room. He had the chair pulled as far away from the bed as it could be. "Sorry I've been incommunicado," he said. "I . . ." The word faded, and he stared blankly for a moment, out of excuses. "I don't know," he finally said. "I'm sorry."

"Have you seen Vetter?" Joe asked. "You know she's here?"

Nick nodded, expressionless, staring at the man on the bed. "I had him," he said. "Last night. The day before, whatever. If I'd only brought him straight here . . ."

Joe pulled up the second chair. "He doesn't look good. What do the doctors say?"

Without a word, Nick drew back the sheet covering Vachon's arm, showing him the track marks. Joe couldn't help but notice the pains he took not to touch the man, just the sheet. "Combination of a bad habit and hellish blood loss—that wound on his neck. When the ER staff found him, his blood pressure was almost nonexistent. Someone—probably our other suspect—considerately dumped him on the doorstep."

"Were you able to question him?" Joe asked. Nick shook his head. "Is he going to make it?"

"It's hard to—"

It was funny—in a creepy sort of way, Joe thought later—how Knight turned, already rising before the nurse wheeled Tracy into the room. He hadn't heard a thing. What was even funnier—or at least more disturbing—was the huge wash of emotion he could feel from Vetter when she saw the man in the hospital bed. Knight must have felt it too: he even winced, stepping back a pace.

"You know him?" Joe asked, and Tracy's eyes filled with tears. A rhetorical question, then: even Tracy didn't usually start to cry over total strangers.

"He's . . . one of her informants," Nick said quickly. "We had no idea he was involved."

"Well." Joe wasn't sure what to say. He had the distinct feeling he was missing a hell of a lot of what was going on here. But knowing Vetter and Knight, he wasn't likely to find out unless one of them opened up. And that was as likely as the water cooler suddenly becoming equally cooperative and forthcoming. He sighed. "You ought to head home, Knight. You look like hell."

"There's a while yet before the sun's up. I'd rather wait here."

A look passed between the two detectives, mute, something important and utterly unreadable to Joe Reese. "What's the sun got to do with it?" he asked.

It was Tracy's turn to fill in: "Nick's . . . ah . . . allergies," she said, face going crimson. "He was really sick today. He'd better stay out of the sun for a while—back on nights, I guess, hey Nick?"

Knight rose abruptly, looking down the empty hall. "I'm going to see if I can find a coffee machine," he said, and was gone before Joe could ask him to bring back a cup of strong, extra sugar.

Joe wondered if he should leave Vetter alone, give her some privacy. Then he reminded himself that this was a suspect in a brutal series of murders. The last thing he needed was one of his detectives getting all wet-eyed over a cold killer. "So what's this all about, Vetter? He's not just an informant, is he?"

Oh, God, he knew that look. That face lifted in supplication, the eyes brimming with tears look that meant something awful like *Daddy, I'm pregnant.* He was a little taken aback at that thought: he wasn't Tracy's father . . . but he sure as hell felt like it at that moment. "It'll be okay, Tracy," he muttered, bending over the wheelchair to give her an awkward hug. If he felt like her father, he might as well act like it, too.

She didn't try to tell him anything—a good thing, since she couldn't have managed a coherent word through the sobs—and he didn't press. It was obvious she was in love with the guy, no matter what anyone else thought about him.

Nick slipped back into the room like a pale shadow shortly before Natalie arrived. One look at her, and Joe Reese gave up. He couldn't handle another weeping woman. Making excuses no one listened to, he beat a hasty retreat, hoping to hell someone—anyone—would fill him in later.

"Let's go for a walk," Natalie suggested, offering her hand to Nick. Tracy was already as close to Vachon as she could get, the wheelchair pulled up tight to the hospital bed. When they got back, Natalie thought, she wouldn't be surprised to find Tracy curled up beside him, asleep.

"I can't get too close," Nick said quietly. "I'm sorry, Nat . . ."

"I know," she said, "and it's okay. It was the only thing he could do." She'd thought she'd be angry when she finally saw him, but all she felt was a deep, overwhelming sadness. Everything they'd done, everything they'd accomplished, all wiped away in an instant. A sudden, nervous thought: "How are you . . .?"

Her answer was a reluctant admission: "Holding out, so far, but . . ." He shook his head. "If I could, I'd bring him across, but just thinking about the blood—!" His eyes flared red and he clenched his fists, helpless to stop it. "I can't. I can't do it."

"Follow me." Natalie led the way to the lab and the big walk-in cooler, Nick keeping a two-yard distance between them. It wasn't too difficult for Nick to "suggest" to the single nurse in the lab to forget they'd been there, and a few minutes later, bags of O tucked inside his jacket, they let themselves out.

"Maybe you should go," Nick suggested, eyes hungry, his hand compulsively checking the hidden bags.

"I'm in this for the long haul, remember?" Natalie checked the TV room. "Empty—come on. I'll watch the door."

"Nat—"

She knew better than to touch him. "I know. Go on. I'll wait outside."

He caught her arm, pulling her close. "Don't be afraid, I won't—" Just for a moment, he held her, burying his face in her hair. "You smell so wonderful . . ." he whispered. "Oh, God, Nat, this isn't fair . . ."

His eyes were completely red, burning. And full of dark tears. Gently he pushed her away, shuddering a little. "Now you'd better go."

17

". . . Girl, you gotta love your man . . .
Take him by the hand,
make him understand:
the world on you depends,
our life will never end.
Gotta love your man . . ."

The night went by, and nothing happened. Nick was strung like a wire, keeping watch at Vachon's side through the night. When he nearly attacked Tracy trying to slip in an hour before dawn, she announced, "This is crazy. We can't just sit here and wait for her."

He swallowed the rush of vampire adrenaline. "What else can we do? She hasn't gone back to the warehouse, and nobody knows where else to look."

"I've been thinking," Tracy said with a nervous twist at her hair. "You said she probably can't sense him, right? If she could, she never would have lost him that night at the bar. So what if we tell the press he's dead? If we only let one doctor in on it—and we tell him to take a long weekend out of town—she wouldn't be able to whammy anybody into blurting out the truth."

"So far so good," Nick agreed. "Then what?"

"Then we draw her out."

There was a hard light in her china-blue eyes that Nick didn't like. "Using you as bait? Not a chance!"

If anything, her eyes got harder. "What else are we going to do, then? Just sit here and wait? It's me she really wants, Nick. Sure, she wants Vachon—" She dropped her voice a notch, not wanting to wake him. "—but she wants me dead. Let's let her think she can have that. Let's make it so tempting, she can't resist."

"Where?" Nick asked. "Your place isn't secure—"

"—but yours is," she finished for him. "You designed it that way, so nobody could get in, not even another vampire, right?" When he didn't answer immediately, she gave him a poke. "Right? Come on, Nick—nobody's got any other ideas! We can't do this by the book, not without Captain Reese and a lot of other people seeing something we don't want them to see. What if she'd showed up here?"

"Natalie—"

"—can stay at a hotel. Or with friends. I've already talked to her about it, and she's okay with it."

"And she agrees?" Tracy was right: he couldn't think of anything better. Couldn't think of anything, for that matter. A glance at his watch told him he had about half an hour. "Okay, when do we do this?"

Tracy gave him a nervous smile. "Right now. Shift change is right about at dawn. I'll get the doctor, and you get your whammy ready."

* * * * *

Vachon played his part well, too sick and drugged to do anything but look like a corpse anyway. As they were rushing him out through the morgue entrance to the Caddy, Nick had a sudden surge of doubt, but it was too late to turn back now: the sun was about to crest the horizon. Pulling the trunk lid shut, he hoped Tracy had thought to get a supply of whatever the hospital had been giving Vachon. If she hadn't, they were going to be in a whole lot of trouble when it wore off.

* * * * *

Nick didn't know how Tracy could do it. The sharp smell of vomit and sour sweat permeated the entire apartment, and from the sound of the retching sobs coming from the bathroom upstairs, it was safe to conclude that Vachon had plummeted to an even deeper circle of hell. But Tracy was at his side, had been for two days and nights straight now, and was showing no signs of giving up. Nick couldn't even approach the stairs anymore, let alone the upper floor.

It was too late now, with Urs probably watching the hospital, the doctors, Tracy's apartment, not believing the newspaper reports, but Nick really wished they'd thought this whole thing through before they'd acted. He'd been right about one thing: Tracy *had* been too exhausted to consider the consequences of suddenly cutting off the chemical cocktail the hospital had been giving Vachon to slowly wean him off the street drugs. Now she was seeing it first hand.

The second night had been the worst. When Vachon first surfaced from the drug-induced coma, he was irritable, uncomfortable, disoriented. That degenerated into agitation and anxiety coupled with more extreme discomfort, cold sweats, abdominal cramps, fever . . . and not long after the sun set on the second day, everything fell apart.

"*Nick*—!" Tracy's shriek brought Nick up to the bedroom in one leap.

Vachon had Tracy pinned to the floor, his fist drawn back to punch her. Nick hauled him off, shoving him away from his disheveled partner. The Spaniard's eyes were wild, his face twisted with rage as he clambered to his feet. "You can't keep me here!" he shouted, flecks of spittle dotting his chin.

"We have to, Vachon—it's for your own good," Tracy tried to tell him, but he wasn't listening. There was a hot red spot on her cheekbone, Nick saw. Vampire senses told him the back of her skull had a hot spot, too; Vachon must have jumped her when her back was turned, hit her at least once. He had to grit his teeth to keep from attacking.

"Fucking bitch!" Vachon screamed as Tracy took a step toward him. "I won't do it!"

Nick caught him at the bedroom door, gave him a rough shake that nearly snapped his neck. "Stop it!"

There was no recognition in the bloodshot eyes. In Spanish this time, Vachon screamed at Nick, struggling with fury. Crazed, he didn't even notice Nick's white-hot eyes, his fangs. Nick couldn't take it—the smell of rage, of sickness—with a guttural shout, he shoved the Spaniard away from him, slamming him into the wall.

"Tie him up—" he hissed at Tracy, backing away. Vachon was dazed, slumped against the wall with a little blood running down his forehead. "I can't be here—"

Restrained, all Vachon could do was scream and curse. And he did—for four hours without letup, his voice getting more raw with every passing hour. Nick was glad Tracy spoke French and not Spanish; the things Vachon called her were beyond foul.

Then all the rules changed again. The psychosis let up a little, trading places with the physical; Vachon's body seemed determined to rid itself of every drop of fluid he had. Tracy spent another few hours in the bathroom with him while he vomited until he finally passed out.

After she'd got him cleaned up and back in bed, Tracy came ghostlike down the stairs. "He's so lost," she told Nick, trying to be so brave, looking so much like an abandoned child. "He didn't even know it was me he was yelling at. I don't know if he even knows it's me with him now."

"Why don't you go have a shower?" Nick suggested. "I'll watch him."

"Yeah," she nodded, sweeping her lank hair away from her forehead. "A shower sounds good." The red spot on her cheekbone had faded to a dull purple-blue, matching the sleepless circles under her eyes.

As soon as he heard the water running, Nick called Natalie. "What did you find out?" he asked.

"I think you'll be over the worst pretty soon as far as the physical symptoms go," she said. "It's the Ritalin that's the real problem. Not having the Talwin and Dilaudid will just make him sick—the cramps and vomiting, fever, sweats—but withdrawal from Ritalin can cause all kinds of psychotic episodes. And once he gets some strength back . . . Don't let your guard down for a minute, Nick."

"I won't," he lied. How could he keep close tabs on the man when he couldn't even bring himself to climb the stairs? The vampire was having enough trouble coping with Tracy being so constantly available; but having two mortals, one of them sick and helpless, was almost unbearable. All his predatory instincts were roused, and there was nothing he could do to quench them, or even dull the sharp edge. Lacroix kept him supplied with bottled blood, but even a bottle an hour was barely enough.

"How are you doing, Nick?"

"I'm all right." Another lie, but one Natalie had heard enough to understand. She'd know he meant *I'm terrible, but talking about it won't help.* "What about you? How's Sidney coping with the kennel?"

"He doesn't like it much at all." Her chuckle was like a caress, and he closed his eyes, savoring it. Everything he valued in life was on the other end of the telephone line: Natalie, their child, a normal life. "The baby's kicking up a storm," Natalie went on. "I think she has a career in football. Do they let girls play football?"

"I don't know." He smiled. Why Natalie was so convinced the baby was a girl was beyond him. He was sure it was a boy.

"Any sign of Urs?"

That brought him back to reality with a jerk. "Not yet. And I won't let Tracy go out yet—she's just about as exhausted as Vachon is. There's no way she's ready, not without rest. —I have to go: she's out of the shower, Nat. I'm supposed to be watching him."

"And you're not?" Natalie was quick to pick up on his meaning. "Nick, what is it?"

"I can't talk now—Love you, Nat," he said quickly, and hung up before Tracy came out in his robe, towel swathed round her head like a huge turban. "Phone," he said, as if *I just ran down to answer it a second ago.*

From the look on Tracy's face just before she ducked into the bedroom to check on Vachon, Nick suspected she'd never be one of those haphazard mothers who'd leave a baby unsupervised, even for twenty seconds. Not for the first time, he wondered what kind of parent he'd be. Now especially, with the old hunger back tenfold.

Tracy came out of the bedroom again, smiling this time. "He's still asleep," she said as she came down the stairs. "I think I'll grab a bite to eat while I have a chance."

"It's just about sunup," Nick said, thumbing the remote that closed the blinds. "How are you doing, Trace? I'm not tired. You can have the couch if you want."

"No, that's okay," she yawned as she rummaged in the fridge. "I'm going to scramble a couple of eggs and go back up. I'll call you if I need you."

At least Urs couldn't do anything during the daylight hours, Nick thought as he watched Tracy pick at the eggs she'd cooked, looking like she might just topple face-first into her plate out of exhaustion. As long as Vachon slept, maybe they could all get some desperately-needed rest.

We'll be all right, he thought, watching the warm glow of the sun light the blinds.

18

". . . desperately in need of some stranger's hand . . ."

—red eyes pain heavy sucking please Urs don't please sucking me down swallowing me swallowing my heart my blood I can't do this please Urs I can't I can't do it I can't I can't—

(Do it, Javier. Do it. You know what I want. Do it.)

—can't I can't I can't oh God Urs don't make me do this don't touch me please don't—

Bodies confused, moving, everything playing over and over again like an endless tape loop: do it I can't do it I can't do it

—blood everywhere smell of shit spilled death somebody's dead is it me am I dead oh please let me be dead let it stop I don't want to remember I do remember bodies moving Urs moving not her not her and the taste of her in my mouth—

"Vachon, wake up! It's just a dream, wake up!"

—true it's true God save me it wasn't her wasn't Urs what have I done oh God what have I done—

Hands touched him, pressed his heaving shoulders down to the sweat-soaked sheets with no effort at all. *—don't make me do it Urs please don't don't—* He couldn't move, couldn't break away from those hands, her face above his, blonde hair, eyes full of tears.

Blue eyes. Little silver crucifix dangling . . . Not Urs. Definitely not Urs. Tracy?

"Shh . . . it's okay," she said. "Vachon, shh . . . I'm here. It's Tracy. You're safe."

He blinked up at the figure leaning over him, not sure if the dream had let him go or not. "Tracy?" Immediately he regretted saying anything: his throat felt raw, burned.

She was ready with a glass of water, holding his head so he could take a few convulsive gulps. "Not too much—you've been pretty sick."

That would explain why it felt like someone had reached down his throat, grabbed his guts, and yanked them inside out. Normally he'd have something witty to say. Twinkle in his eye. All that came out was a croak: "Where . . .?"

"Nick's place," she said, sinking down on the side of the bed. Shyly, she ran her fingertips down his unshaven jaw. "This has gone way beyond 'stubble,' " she said with the quirk of a smile. "You've got a beard."

"What happened?" he rasped.

She tipped the glass for him again. "Don't try and talk."

"Urs—"

"Don't worry about her now," Tracy shushed him. "You're safe here. She thinks you're dead. We brought you here three days ago."

"Three—?" Dark things floated sluglike through his memory: the cold kiss of the porcelain against his cheek as he hung over the toilet, Nick's eyes blazing red with rage. The terrible, mindless, cruel things he'd flung at Tracy. "Coming down . . ."

She nodded. "You're a mess," she said sadly. "A beautiful mess, but . . ." A tear spilled over, running down her cheek. "Why didn't you come to me?" she pleaded. "I would have helped you. I would have done anything for you."

How could I? he thought, wishing he could tell her. *How could I come to you, when I knew what would happen?* He remembered that first night with Urs, a hundred-odd years ago. Seeing her, letting her get under his skin: that sweet smile, that dark-bird voice, that aching sorrow running through her blood, so intoxicating. That was his first mistake. Falling in love with her when he knew damn well it was hopeless, that she was in love with death. Not the angel of death.

Nearly five hundred years, always taking the easy road. Do what his vampire mistress entrusted him to do, or kill the Inca and live free forever? Kill indiscriminately, or follow the strict code of the modern day vampires, so careful, so discreet, so domesticated? Kill Tracy when she didn't fall for the whammy, or stick around and see what happened?

And why should it have been any different when he suddenly found everything had gone so wrong, so horribly wrong? Why stick it out with Tracy, with the grinding day-to-day of mortality, the sword of his own death hanging over his head, about to fall without warning, when he could go to Urs instead?

Just one kiss, Urs, for old time's sake . . . another flashing chance at bliss . . . another kiss . . . He smiled, and Tracy smiled back, so golden, so beautiful and trusting. "What's so funny?"

He shook his head. Saying nothing was safer.

Instead, he glanced at the restraints in mute pleading. *Come on, Trace—this is me. Why do you have me tied down? What am I going to do? Run from the woman I love?*

It nearly killed him to watch the tears well in her beautiful eyes. *I'm sorry, Tracy, I'm sorry* . . . "We had to," she apologized. "If you'd seen yourself . . .!"

I know, Trace. I remember. He couldn't take his eyes off the bruise on her face, the blow echoing through his fist. *Can I do this? Can I do something right for a change? Not the easy thing, but the right thing?* "Please . . ." he whispered, his ruined voice breaking. *Just one last time, please, Tracy.*

It hurt to see how easily she believed him, how little she really knew him. She was sobbing softly as she untied the restraints, as she curled up beside him, nestling close like a small animal in his arms. In need of protection. "It'll be okay," she whispered, her damp hair catching in his beard as her breath tickled his ear. "We'll get through this."

"I know." It took all his strength to say it out loud. To smile at her. Tracy. *My strength and light.* He'd always thought of her as such a fragile thing, something to protect, to shield. She'd walk through fire for him, die for him. Still would, if he let her.

Can't let you do that, Trace. I got myself into this, and I'm not going to take anyone down with me, getting myself out.

He turned his eyes to the light-blocking blinds, feeling the heat of the sun even through the black metal. The big red numbers on the clock radio said it was maybe an hour past sunrise. What about Nick? How would he get past him?

The memory made him jump a little: Nick's face, his bared fangs, eyes like fire. *He's a vampire again. How . . .?*

That wasn't important. He'd be sleeping now: that was all that mattered. Sleeping like Tracy, who wouldn't know what hit her until it was too late.

He kissed her golden head, her soft mouth, the silver crucifix, Jesu protect her . . .

Sorry, Trace. Gotta do this alone.

19

". . . Can you give me sanctuary?
I must find a place to hide,
a place for me to hide.
Can you find me soft asylum,
I can't make it any more . . ."

"Nick! Wake up! *Nick*!"

The hoarse shout came from upstairs, from the bedroom—Nick was there even before he was fully awake. "My God, Tracy!" he gasped. "What happened?"

She was bound to the bed with the same restraints they'd used on Vachon. She'd managed to scrape off the gag he'd tied round her mouth, but by the deep raw marks on her face, Nick could see she'd been struggling for hours while he slept, oblivious to everything.

"He's gone—Vachon's gone!" she gasped. "Let me up—I can't feel my hands—"

"What happened?" The heat bled out of his eyes, canines reluctantly receding. "How? The restraints—?"

Her tearful gaze said it all. "You let him go," he sighed. "Tracy, what were you thinking?"

"I don't know," she moaned. "He seemed okay. He just wanted to hold me, and I . . . I'm sorry, Nick. He's been gone for hours!"

"It's all right," he said, moving away quickly before she broke down altogether. "I'll find him, Tracy, I promise."

* * *

Vachon tucked his frozen hands in the pockets of Nick's jacket, wishing he'd grabbed something heavier, warmer. Just another hour, he promised himself as he glanced up at the overcast sky for the hundredth time. The warm day had given way to rain in the evening, and by the time night fell, a cold front had moved in and the temperature had taken a dive. As soon as it was dark he was on the move, never staying in one place more than twenty minutes or so, just enough to warm up, charm some change or a cup of coffee out of one of the footsore hookers lingering in McDonald's.

He couldn't risk being seen and recognized by anyone inside the El Mocambo at 3 a.m., so he was hanging around the side streets chilled to the bone, while he waited for a dealer called Hele. He'd met him a few times with Urs—here at the Elmo, once at Grossman's—he even knew the number, having seen Urs dial it a thousand times. And he knew enough of the right things to say to set up a meet. Now all he had to do was keep from throwing up again, and he'd be fine.

Urs sent me—she's tied up right now. He rehearsed his lines to keep his teeth from chattering. She wants a dime bag of the good shit—not that cut-back sugar you gave us a while ago—the good shit. And you know how moody she can get if she doesn't get what she wants.

Yeah, that was good. Urs never was one for control. Hele would have seen the yellow come into her eyes a time or two.

He wiped his constantly running rose on the back of his hand, feeling another round of cramping start. Recited all the words to the Doors "The End" to keep himself from doubling over and attracting attention.

Can you picture what will be . . . so limitless and free . . . desperately in need of some stranger's hand . . . in a desperate land . . .

"Hey, friend," a soft Jamaican voice said. "What you doin' standin' out in the rain?"

He glanced up, expecting salvation, and barely choked down a gasp at the sight of a tall black policeman. *Breathe, breathe, breathe*—he reminded himself, and smiled. "Hi, officer. I'm waiting for my girl. She must've got the time wrong. I told her three, but here I am freezing my butt off and there's no Mandy and no warm car."

Good job, Javier! he congratulated himself. No hesitation, no stammer, not even a glimmer of a guilty look. His stomach did a slow, grinding roll that made his eyes water.

"Three?" The officer checked his watch and clucked his tongue. "I think you been stood up, mon. It's five to four."

Vachon groaned inwardly. *Hele, man, where are you?* But he forced another grin, swallowing the bile that was crawling up the back of his throat, and said, "Is that all? Hey, this is nothing—last week it was two hours! Turned out she went to the right number, but Queen St. West instead of East. Beautiful, but no brains. But she'll show. Thanks for asking. I appreciate it, man."

The policeman looked into his eyes, searching, and Vachon hung in, not blinking, not glancing away. "You need bus fare, my friend?" the man asked finally. "A dollar or two for a hot cup of coffee?"

"Nah—I'm flush, man! Look at this jacket—if I was broke, I could hawk this baby for a hundred bucks easy on Spadina. Am I right?"

The policeman shook his head sadly. "Right you are, mon," he said, digging in his pocket and coming up with a five dollar bill anyway. "You take care. And get yourself inside before you freeze." And then he finally moved off down the street.

Vachon sagged against the doorway, his stomach in knots. As soon as the policeman was round the corner and out of sight, he turned and choked up a thin yellow stream of coffee and bile, wishing he could just die and be done with it.

When he turned back to the street, a long, shiny pink Lincoln had pulled up and was waiting patiently, the driver watching him with amusement. "You Haviar?" he asked, butchering the name.

"That's me." *Oh, God what was I going to say? Something about good shit, not sugar—* "I—" His brain shut down, all his clever lines gone.

It didn't matter. The man just grinned at him, showing him a diamond-studded front tooth, and shoved open the passenger door. "Get in," he said, chuckling. "Her majesty's been lookin' for you."

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick cruised above the city, senses open, seeking. He didn't see the jewel-sparkle of the city lights—he saw infra-red patterns, bodies, clusters of heat. He didn't smell the exhaust, the food cooking or fireplaces burning—he smelled body odors and false pheromones and the siren sweetness of blood. The human in him was buried deep somewhere, held in waiting. It wasn't needed now, could do little to help him find Tracy or Vachon. More than once he found himself thinking *If only Screed were alive!* If he could only call upon that singing bloodlink that bound a father and son together, he could track Urs through her link to another of Vachon's children.

That sent him spiraling down towards John and Howard, close to the Raven. Lacroix was coming out of his broadcast booth, his monologue cut short when he felt Nick's approach. "Nicholas," he greeted him formally, and Nick surprised them both by hugging his master and father.

"Lacroix. It's good to see you."

The older vampire drew back, smiling. "And you, Nicholas. How like the old days this is—if only Janette were here, we—"

"Lacroix, listen to me," Nick cut him short. "That's exactly what I need to know. The bloodlink—you and me and Janette—I need to know how to track Urs."

"Nicholas, you're babbling." Lacroix gently steered him towards the bar, where two glasses of his house special were instantly poured and slid towards them. "Here: sit. Drink. Collect your thoughts into something resembling coherence, and tell me what it is you need to know."

Nick gulped down the blood, pushed his glass toward the bartender. "More." Drained that glass just as quickly. "Who else was part of Vachon's family?" he asked, a little of the wildness leaving his eyes. "Were there any others besides Urs and Screed? Anyone who could help me find Urs?"

Lacroix made a pleased little sound. "Wonderful!" he said. "Yes, Nicholas, I see what you're thinking! I should have thought of that . . ." He clicked his tongue in self-blame. "You know, of course, that she stopped coming here shortly after you were in here asking about the Spaniard. A pity. She was quite the little crowd-pleaser. I had a number of very disappointed patrons asking after her." His head swiveled suddenly, his sharp grey gaze scanning the room. "That one, Nicholas: the dark-haired boy. I think his name is Shannon. He was particularly taken with our Ursula, and he's one of us now. He's very likely one of hers."

Perhaps hearing his name, the boy half-turned in question, and Nick inhaled sharply. "My God!" he said under his breath. Long dark hair, fine features, big dark eyes . . .

"Yes, it's rather obvious what she saw in him," Lacroix agreed dryly. "You might be able to use that, Nicholas. He was only a substitute, after all, and an abandoned substitute at that. If he knows the situation, he might be angry enough with her to betray her. But that doesn't mean he might not still care for her deeply, despite what she's done."

Nick reached for his wallet, but Lacroix made another "tsk!" sound and pushed the empty glass and half-full bottle towards him. "On the house, Nicholas. Good luck."

20

"Waiting for you to hear my song . . .
waiting for you to come along . . .
waiting for you to tell me what went wrong . . ."

Buy time.

That was the thing first and foremost in Vachon's mind as Hele, Urs' supplier, drove him to the suite Urs was renting on Madison. Buy time, because the night was long in the Canadian autumn, and timing was everything tonight.

And an entire night with Urs . . . the thought made his stomach try to climb up his throat. Definitely not a smart way to think. *She knows you too well, Javier. She'll see right through you if you're not careful.*

"We almost there?" he asked, turning in the seat to look out the rear window.

"You okay, man?" Hele asked. "You're not gonna puke in my car, are you?"

"No, I just want to make sure nobody's following us . . ." Vachon let it trail off, pretending to wrestle with a decision.

"Following us!?" The drug dealer checked his mirrors. "What the hell is this, man? Why would we be followed less'n you had the cops on you?"

"Not me," Vachon said. "Urs. Remember that last time we were at Grossman's? You, me and Urs? And a blonde, real tall, slim, medium-length hair about like—" He indicated a vague length. "Wearing a red blouse . . ."

"That hot number?" Hele protested. "You're not going to tell me she was a *cop*?"

No, Vachon thought, *she was a hooker. But she looked enough like Tracy that Urs called her over while we were all sitting around the table. She looked enough like Tracy that Urs killed her, too.* "That same cop was hanging around Elmo's the night the Trag played—were you there? Yeah, me too. I spotted her talking with a couple uniforms, twigged to the fact she's a cop, and got the hell out of there with Marcus."

Hele frowned. "I saw Marcus a couple days ago. He did say he ran into you." The man started nodding, looking worried. "Yeah, yeah . . .! I remember he said you were runnin' from the cops! Jesus, man, what've you got me into?"

"Me?" Vachon pushed up his sleeves, showed the man the track marks. "I'm the one putting it up my arm! If I get you into anything, I screw myself, right? The way I figure it, either Urs is too stupid to know what she's getting into, or she's setting you up for a fall. You ever see *her* get high?"

"Jesus!" Hele was sweating now, his forehead shiny. "What if she's an informant? She's not stupid. I'll bet she knows the broad's a cop. God damn! That bitch is trying to nail me!"

Hallelujah. Vachon closed his eyes, letting his head rest against the black-filmed window. He'd been starting to wonder if Hele would ever rise to the bait. "You know how it goes, man," he sighed. "The cops love to play us one against the other. You should drop a dime on her, call them yourself. Then if she names you, you're off the hook."

"What about you?" Hele asked. "Why not get yourself out of town?"

Vachon smiled, shaking his head. "I'm flat broke. I couldn't take a bus to Sarnia. Besides, it's like you said: she's looking for me. You know what she's like."

"I sure do," Hele said grimly. He gave Vachon his hand. "Good luck, man. You're gonna need it."

"Thanks," Vachon said, meaning it. "You going to make that call?"

Hele nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I will. Maybe gather some shit, put some distance between me and her first. Tell you what. I'll give you an hour, then I'll make the call. Give you a chance to get the hell out." The big car slid to a cushioned stop in front of a high-rise. "Top floor. Take it easy, man."

"Hey, I appreciate it," Vachon said warmly as he let himself out.

The first thing he did upon getting into the elevator was jam two fingers down his throat, giving his gag reflex a kick start. When Urs opened the door to the apartment, Vachon was leaning against the doorjamb, his face the color of old cheese.

"Urs—" he gasped, falling into her arms. "I found you—"

Blanking his mind, he clung to her, letting his control drop like a stone. The hours of preparation, or planning, all fell away as he went to his knees, his arms round her legs, his face against her soft denim thigh. *Urs, my unholy Madonna, my virgin whore, bless me now in the hour of my death . . .*

She lifted him easily, like a mother lifts a child, lifted him so he could find her mouth, so he could whisper his promises from his lips to hers, sinner to Madonna. "I'm sorry, Urs, I'm sorry. I couldn't do anything couldn't get back to you, but now I'm here, I found you. I found you."

In his heart he was thinking *Please God strike me dead for this but wait. Not yet. Let me do what I have to do first. Then I'm yours. Anything you want.*

* * *

Natalie sat at her desk, the crime scene photos from the three murders spread out in front of her. Nick had told her not to go in to work, that it was too dangerous, but this was too important.

And she wasn't important enough. Urs wouldn't care about her, would only care about Nick if he tried to interfere. As far as Natalie was concerned, she'd been right when she started looking into organized and disorganized patterns in murder. And it didn't matter that Urs was a woman; everything she'd done was consistent with the pattern.

The first murder. Ugly, but no worse than a hundred others she'd seen in the past year. A murder that said I'm pissed off and I can't have the one I really want but you're close enough. The victim, blonde, pretty, didn't really look much like Tracy. But maybe Urs was starting, by that time, to see Tracy Vetter in all pretty blondes. Maybe Vachon had unthinkingly said something complimentary about the girl or merely looked at her in a way Urs felt was admiring.

And the entire crime scene, an empty warehouse, had been a textbook case of an organized killing: the victim had been killed somewhere else—Vachon's church—and the body taken to the pre-selected location to be dumped. Precautions had been taken so little evidence was left. Only Nick, Tracy, and Natalie knew why there was so little blood; it certainly wasn't because the victim was killed elsewhere, like everyone else thought. The wound to the throat had been clean, quick, heartless. The rest of the wounds were probably a reaction to the frustration Urs felt: this wasn't Tracy, wasn't the one she really wanted.

The second murder, in hideous comparison, was an exercise in savagery. Sexual focus. Multiple stab wounds in the genital area, on the breasts, on the throat. Had there been bites, Natalie suddenly wondered. Bites covered by the stabbing and mutilation? She peered closer at the photos. When did Urs start biting the girls? Why would she bite a girl at all? Vampires, like humans, followed their own sexual preferences and as far as she knew, Urs, like Nick and Vachon, was heterosexual. What made her bite a woman, when biting was the most sexual aspect of vampire lovemaking?

She sat back in her chair, thinking of the first terrifying forays she and Nick had made into sexual activity. Lots of limits, lots of time outs, one or both of them needing to back off before they lost control.

I was the worst one, Natalie thought fondly. *Never wanting to stop even when all the warning flags were up. Always wanting to push it just a little more, wait* *just a little longer, come a little closer to death before letting Nick pull away.*

Just a little closer . . .

Unwillingly, she pulled the photos from the third murder into view. Control gone now, all the stops pulled out. Fury loose with no limits, no boundaries, *do it, do it, I don't care what happens just do it, Nick, do it—*

She closed her eyes, shuddering. *Whoa, what was that? Get a grip, Natalie! You're looking at crime scene photos here, not home movies—especially your home movies, ending in blood and biting and near death!*

But this *did* end in blood and biting and near death. *Don't turn away*, she told herself fiercely, her heart constricting in her chest. *Don't look away, damn you, Nat, don't you dare! It's the same. It is, no matter how horrible that is, no matter how much you don't want it to be. Why is it the same?*

And why are the murders so different? What happened between that tidy, controlled, organized first killing and the wild fury of the next ones? What changed? Something had to. Something pushed Urs over the edge, out of control.

Natalie closed her eyes again, rubbing them until bright spots danced in front of her lids. Opened them, refusing to let herself think. Refusing to let herself take sides.

And all of a sudden she saw it.

Saw herself, locked in the bathroom that first night, crying uncontrollably with the tub running full blast to cover the sound, crying at the sight of herself, bruised and bitten and savaged. And Nick, so worried, asking, "Did I hurt you? I tried to be gentle . . ." How could she hurt him by admitting how painful it had been? How could she go back into the bedroom, knowing what she'd face?

But what she was thinking didn't make sense. She knew Urs was doing the biting. Only one bite was Vachon's—a post-mortem bite. A bite to the throat, a vampire's bite—

A vampire *lover's* bite.

She opened her eyes, stared at the photo, knowing she'd stumbled on it: Urs was trying to recreate the past—recreate Tracy, bruised and bitten and savaged—but why?

Did she think Vachon would be aroused?

Had he been?

It was a horrible thought. She knew from the toxicology tests that Vachon had been so loaded with chemicals, he probably had no idea where he was, what he was doing that night, even who he was with. There'd been no sign of intercourse, either completed or attempted, she reminded herself. No matter how out of it he'd been, he wasn't that far gone.

But had Urs pushed him to the point where he thought he'd been with Tracy? Did he think he'd bitten Tracy?

Another home movie, one Natalie really wished she could flush from her memory. Nick, his entire body tensed, trembling, begging, "Bite me—oh, God, Nat, *please—*"

A vampire lover's kiss. A holdover from the old life, the old lovemaking. But what was it—what Vachon wanted?

No. What *Urs* wanted. She wanted Vachon to make love to *her*.

The timing fit. Vachon disappears when he realizes what's happened to him, he looks up his old girlfriend, pleads with her to bring him back across. *No,* Urs says. *Not until you do what I want, Javier. Make me mortal, Javier. Make love to me and make me mortal.* But he refuses, either because he knows he'll never be brought back across if he agrees, or because he just plain and simple can't bring himself to do it. Because he's still in love with Tracy.

So Urs kills the first girl as a warning: *this is what I'll do to your precious Tracy if you don't do what I want, Javier.*

He doesn't want to do what she wants, figures it's best for everybody, Tracy included, if he gets the hell out of Dodge, and bolts for Montreal. Rejoins the band. Maybe even tries to get his act together as a mortal.

But the Montreal deal goes sour. Everybody's broke. It's back to Toronto and hope like hell he doesn't run into Urs . . . but he does.

Then what? Left with no choice, he agrees. *Okay, Urs, I'll do it. Don't kill Tracy. I swear, I'll do it.*

Maybe they try, but it just isn't working. With a vampire, it was simple: a little blood, a sharp nip to the throat, and he's ready, willing and raring to go. But a mortal man . . . It just didn't work the same way. If the spirit wasn't willing, the flesh could be downright uncooperative.

The drugs don't do the trick. The Tracy stand-in doesn't do the trick. Urs tries everything, but it isn't working. So she takes out her frustrations on "Tracy," beyond caring where she is, whether she's leaving evidence, anything.

By this time, Vachon's so strung out, he probably doesn't know up from down, Tracy from Urs, or night from day. He couldn't have made love to anybody under any circumstance. This probably doesn't improve Urs' mood.

Then there was the third killing, the one with the ugly bonus of a sexual twist: the bites. The fact that Vachon had bitten the girl at all must mean he was a hell of a lot closer to where Urs wanted him to be.

"Oh, my God . . .!" Natalie gasped, all the pieces suddenly falling into place.

Grace had been right—Grace said it, back when they were looking at the photos a few days ago! "Sure, he was high as a kite," she'd said. "But that's no excuse, not for this. He was going for blood."

Going for blood, that magic blood that would give him back his life, his vampire life? That wasn't possible, was it? But that had to be it. *Oh, God*, Natalie thought. *He didn't think he was with Tracy at all. He thought he was with Urs.*

21

"When the music's over,
turn out the lights . . ."

This is the end, beautiful friend, the end. This is the end, my only friend, the end, of our elaborate plans, the end. Of everything that stands, the end, no safety or surprise, the end. I'll never look into your eyes again . . .

A cool hand trailed over his cheek. "You awake yet, Javier?"

Of course she knew he was, could tell from his breathing and heartbeat. He opened his eyes and smiled at her. "Hey, Urs."

"Hey yourself," she smiled back, trailing her fingers through his hair. "You been pretty sick, huh?"

"I've been better." What time was it? How much of the night had he managed to waste? Enough that Hele had made the call to the police? "How long have I been asleep?"

"A couple hours. You looked so wasted, I thought you needed it." A pause, considering. "It was pretty bad, wasn't it? What I did?"

He closed his eyes, seeing bodies and blood, too much blood, and Urs screaming like something possessed. "It's okay," he lied. "You thought it was what you had to do. I didn't help." He opened his eyes, gazed right into hers, knowing the lie would have more power with tears behind it. "I was wrong, Urs. She wasn't like you. She could never be what you were to me. What you still are."

This was it. The moment of truth. If she didn't buy it, he was dead. He smiled at her, reaching up to cup her cheek in his hand, to pull her down so he could whisper against her throat, his tongue kissing the pale skin: "My virgin whore . . . my Madonna of the damned . . . I love you, Urs. Forgive me. Please forgive me for leaving you, for hurting you."

She went still in his arms, doubt and confusion freezing her. "Do you really mean that, Javier?" she whispered back. "Or are you lying to me, trying to trick me?"

"Kiss me," he said, sliding one hand up her cropped T-shirt to find her bare breast. "Kiss me and ask me if I'm lying to you."

* * * * *

"Urs? Yeah, I know her." Up close, the boy didn't look nearly as much like Vachon, but the resemblance was still disturbing. "Haven't seen her in ages, though. Think she split town. Wham, bam, thank you Shan." He gave Nick a wan smile. "You a friend of hers, man?"

"A friend of another one of her friends," Nick said carefully. "You might know him. His name's Vachon. Javier Vachon."

The boy's eyes did a slow burn from deep brown to yellow-green. "Don't know him."

"But you know *about* him," Nick suggested.

"Yeah." He reached for Nick's bottle, poured himself a glass. "Should have known it was too good to be true, a babe like her interested in a kid like me—I mean, shit, man, I'm only eighteen! Was only eighteen. She said he was dead, that I reminded her of him a little. That it was no big deal, no baggage, you know? Like he was dead and gone, so what can I say? She used to slip sometimes, call me Javier, but I was cool with that. I mean, she spent like a century with him. I had her for about three weeks and then . . ." His eyes sparked again, and he nodded toward the bottle, asking this time.

"Sure," Nick nodded. "Pour me one. Then what happened? You found out he wasn't dead?"

"That's about it," Shannon sighed. " 'It's been a slice, Shanny-boy, but my true love's come home,' and that's all she wrote. I haven't seen her since 'cept at Elmo's about a week ago."

"The night the Tragically Hip played?" Nick asked.

The kid grinned at him, probably surprised that Nick even knew the band's name, let alone that they'd played at the El Mocambo. "Yeah, how'd you know?"

"I was there, too," Nick smiled, clinking his glass on Shannon's. "And so was our friend Vachon. He was playing just before the headliners arrived."

A light went on in the boy's face. "Holy shit . . ." he breathed. "Yeah . . . I remember thinking he had some great licks. That's him?" The light flickered a little. "But . . ."

"He's not a vampire?" Nick asked. "No. And that's why Urs dropped you like a rock." He leaned closer, praying he was reading the boy correctly. "Shannon, I need your help . . ."

❑❑❑❑❑

Vachon was just taking off his shirt when Urs hushed him. "Someone's coming up," she said. "I'm not expecting anyone."

"So?" He continued unbuttoning as if nothing was wrong. His hands were shaking so much he could barely get the button through the hole. "Don't answer the door."

"No . . ." She was on her feet now, pulling on her T-shirt, gathering up her shoes. "No, it sounds wrong. Two people sneaking up the stairs. I don't like it."

"Cops?" Vachon grabbed the jacket he'd tossed aside. "They must be watching Hele, followed him here! You must have a back way out—"

"'Course I do," she chuckled, heading for the patio. "Come on—I know a place over on—"

"Let's go to the church," he suggested. "They'll have already looked there. They won't go back. We'll be safe there."

She hesitated, staring at the floor with a little-girl frown like she'd been caught doing something wrong. "I . . . kind of trashed it," she said in a small voice.

"Ah, who cares? It was no screaming hell to start with. I had some other rooms half-assed fixed up, upstairs—you get that one, too?"

She was surprised. "No. I thought you just stayed in the basement."

There was a knock at the door. "I was trying to convince Screed to take the basement. I was going to move into the upper rooms. —We better get out of here, Urs. Let's talk about it later, okay?"

As she lifted off from the balcony, Vachon closed his eyes to shut out the blurring lights. *Last time I'll ever do this*, he thought. *I should try and enjoy it.* Instead, he buried his face against Urs' breast and went back to reciting lyrics to keep himself blank and empty.

This is the end, beautiful friend. This is the end, my only friend, the end . . . of our elaborate plans, the end . . . of everything that stands, the end. No safety or surprise, the end . . . I'll never look into your eyes again. Can you picture what we'll be: so limitless and free, desperately in need of some stranger's hand in a desperate land . . .

❑❑❑❑❑

"This is it," the Vachon look alike, Shannon, said, shivering a little as he tried to sort out whether he could sense Urs in the apartment building far below them or not. "No, she's not here."

"Somebody is," Nick said, nodding to the squad car parked out front. "Wait for me—I have to go talk to them, see if they're here for the same reasons we are."

He was back with the young vampire in no time. "The patio doors were open," he said. "Come on—you've got to try harder. You *can* sense her, can't you?"

"Yeah . . ." Shannon agreed. He didn't sound too certain.

"Let's try again," Nick said. "You did really well, Shannon. They were here: you found her once, you can do it again."

❑❑❑❑❑

"You're ringing," Urs said as they landed near the hidden outside entrance to the church.

"It's not for me," Vachon said, leading her inside. "It's stolen. Thought I could get a few bucks for it." He tossed the cell phone on the bed. "Hey, did you trash that chest when you were here?"

"I didn't see any chest."

No big surprise, Vachon thought, because it doesn't exist. "It's under the bed, here." He casually flipped part of the stained sheet over the phone, getting down on his knees to peer beneath the bed. "I had some extra clothes in it—here it is." To cover the sound of what he was doing, he rambled on about a nonexistent T-shirt, a teal-colored one he'd shrunk to Barbie-size in the wash, one that would look great on Urs—

"*Ow!*" he cried suddenly, jerking back. "Must be some broken glass—!"

There had been: he'd put it there over eight hours before, the first thing he'd done when he got to the church. Staring at the deep cut, he was shocked at how much it hurt, how sick he felt at the sight of the blood. But there was no turning back now, not with Urs' eyes suddenly bright. "Let me see—" she said breathlessly.

He closed his fist on the blood, holding it away from her. "Wait."

Sudden suspicion in the yellow as she reached for him. "What?"

He took a deep breath. "Urs, we've got to do this my way, or it's not going to work. If you bite me, it's all over before we even get started. We've got to go slow, understand?"

"If you're trying to trick me—"

"No. I'm not. Listen to me, Urs. Think about what I'm saying: you've got to let me do everything, start to finish, while you hold out as long as you can. We might only get one chance at it. I might not make it after you bite me. Have you thought of that?"

Her shoulders moved in a slow twist. "... yeah ..."

He plowed ahead, feeling like he was going to throw up again just at the thought of her mouth at his throat, sucking, pulling— "... so that one chance has to be a keeper. C'mon, Urs, just think how great it'll be to go *slow* for a change! I want to make up for all those times it was just me, what *I* wanted. I'm sorry about that." Keep your eyes on her, steady, steady, don't look away or you're dead. "I want to make love to you, Urs, not just fuck you. That's what it's all about. That's the only way this can work."

Her expression softened, her eyes darkening and filling with tears. "Okay," she said softly. "I'll try."

"Okay," he nodded, setting his wounded hand momentarily on the door frame. "Come on—I'll show you the way."

22

"The face in the mirror won't stop.
The girl in the window won't drop."

When Nick finally thought to call Tracy, she didn't answer either her cell phone or the phone in the loft, and when he flew back to check on her, all he found was a note saying, "Tried to call you, but you didn't answer. Sorry—couldn't sit on my hands any longer. Tracy."

"Bad news?" Shannon asked unnecessarily. His dark eyes were wide, taking in Nick's spacious loft. "So we're looking for both of them now? The guy with Urs, and the girl, the one who was here?"

Nick nodded. He'd known in the darkest part of his heart that Tracy would go out looking for Vachon, and the thought of the danger she was in filled him with a crushing human dread. "She'll kill them both if we don't find her in time," he said, paralyzed.

The young vampire gave him a hopeful smile. "It's okay, man. I'll find her for you—I swear I will. Don't you worry about your friends."

"Thanks," Nick said, warmed a little by the boy's faith. Just because Tracy was out there looking for Urs and Vachon didn't mean she'd find them, he told himself. She had no more idea than they did where the pair could have gone.

☐☐☐☐☐

Tracy knew Nick had wanted her to stay locked in the safe confines of his loft, but as the hours ticked by, evening turning into night, night beginning to wane, she knew she had to do something. Then when she'd gone to the closet to get her jacket and gun, she'd realized just how much both she and Nick had underestimated Vachon: not only had he taken the gun, he'd taken her cell phone, too.

She'd been sure he'd go to the church, but when she didn't find him there, she checked all the other places she could think of—Screed's old place, the warehouse where the band had practiced, her own apartment—but Vachon wasn't at any of them. And if he had been there, he'd left no evidence. Now, with all her ideas run out, she was back at the church. Standing in his dropcloth-draped bedroom surveying the wreckage, she wondered how Natalie could have thought he'd done this kind of damage. This was a woman's work, a woman scorned and furious, trying to eradicate every scrap of evidence that there had been a rival.

Me, thought Tracy, swallowing salty regret. *Oh, Vachon, how could you be so stupid? How could you not know she was hurting like this?* The first victim had been killed here, Natalie had told them just a few days ago, keeping her voice low, hushed. Even Grace hadn't seen that file, the one with some of the most damning evidence. Candle wax. Threads from the sheets on this bed. Blood with a few odd characteristics only Natalie recognized: vampire characteristics that didn't quite disappear when the vampire turned mortal; a few lingering antibodies that didn't match any known profiles; some oddly-shaped platelets carrying more oxygen than any blood cell should.

As far as she could see, no one had been there since Natalie, collecting her samples.

"Where else would you go?" she murmured to the dust-covered and ruined bedroom. "When you were sick, this is the place you came to die, in this bed. In this church. This is where we made love the first time. This is where everything changed. You should be *here*. It doesn't make sense for you to be anywhere else."

Shining her big flashlight slowly round the room, she knew she was missing something. Something that should be clear as day, but wasn't.

Wait a minute—

She went to the arched doorway, shone the bright light at the wooden molding. Slowly swept it up and down. There. A small red-brown smudge. It couldn't have been here before. Nick had dusted for prints himself, and he never would have missed one left in blood. Testing it with her finger, she found it was still damp. She put her finger to her nose, inhaled. A faint wisp of scent clung there, coppery.

An idea struck her, something so crazy she knew it had to be right. What had he said, just before he left? Something about breadcrumbs . . .? Heart pounding, she went to the next room, searched the doors . . . there! Another smudge.

Her mind went back to their first night. He'd said something about crumbs then, too, laughing about how their clothes had been left in an untidy trail down the hallways and stairs to the bedroom.

And tonight he'd said: "Sorry I can't leave any breadcrumbs you can follow, Trace."

Nothing *she* could follow . . . but a vampire could. He'd left a trail, small smears of blood like Passover markings on certain doorways, knowing Nick could find them, would most certainly find them if he came back to the church. And if the stains were still wet . . . Tracy glanced at the stairs, her heart accelerating.

If only Vachon had a phone here! No matter—she'd call Nick as soon as she got to the Ident unit. A vampire wasn't the only one who could follow a blood trail: so could a detective with a spray bottle full of distilled water and a certain few chemicals that became luminescent on contact with the iron in blood. She'd pick up some Luminol at Ident, call Nick, and he could meet her back here.

Together, they could figure out where Vachon's trail of bloodcrumbs led.

❑❑❑❑❑

Joe Reese slammed the phone receiver down, sick to death of listening to Nick's answering machine. Where he'd ever got the mistaken notion Knight and Vetter could work together—! Neither of them ever answered their calls, neither of them ever called in, ever did anything they were supposed to—!

"Hills!" he barked. "I just got a call from Dubrovsky over at Narcotics—he says he got a tip on our triple murder, and the description matches that woman who was in here calling herself Vetter's sister. Get somebody over there ASAP."

Radio collars, he thought. That's what he should have for his damned detectives. Radio collars so he could send a little 100-volt wake-up call over the airwaves, jolt them into calling in once in a while. For lack of anything else to do, he picked up the receiver again and punched in the number for Tracy's cell phone. "Might as well have their numbers on speed-dial . . .!" he muttered as it rang.

About to hang up, he suddenly heard "Vetter."

He gaped at the papers on his desk, too stunned to speak until the voice added irritably, "If this is some heavy breather, I'm hanging up . . ."

"Vetter!" he managed to blurt. "Wait! It's Joe Reese. Where in hell have you been? Is Knight with you? I've been calling you all night!"

The disappointment in her voice was palpable. "Nick hasn't called in? Listen, Cap, I don't have much time—when Nick does call, tell him to get over to the church right away, okay? But *don't* send backup. Gotta go—"

The receiver went dead. Grumbling, Joe hung up as well. " 'Don't send backup'—how can I, when I don't know where the damn church is in the first place?"

There was a knock at the door, and he looked up to find Natalie, flushed and wide-eyed, letting herself into his office. "No he hasn't, no I don't, and yes I will," he told her before she could even open her mouth. "But Vetter just called, and since Nick will no doubt call *you* before it ever occurs to him to call *me*, you can give him her message: go to the church ASAP. Whatever that means."

"The church?" Her eyes got even wider. Then she glanced at her watch, and relief flooded her face. "Thank God. The sun'll be up soon. Thanks, Captain. If I hear from Nick, I'll remind him to call in."

As she turned and hurried out, nearly running, Joe looked at his own watch. "What in the name of blazes does the *sun* have to do with anything?" he wondered out loud.

❑❑❑❑❑

When did he stop looking at me like this? Urs wondered breathlessly. She was watching Vachon unhook her stocking and carefully roll it down her thigh. He glanced up just before he continued rolling the stocking over her knee, sliding it down her calf, his hand following the deep curve. It had been so long ago, she'd forgotten how it used to make her feel. His eyes on her, seeing only her, pupils going wide as his palm brushed her naked thigh.

She remembered when she'd first seen him sitting there in the saloon: those eyes, so wide, dark, so liquid, never looking away. Only for her. The hunger in the silent, still way he sat listening to her sing. Not the same kind of hunger as other men. She'd known that, felt it, from that first moment.

Just thinking about that hunger made her tug at his shirt, urging him to take it off, to hurry. *Come up on the bed with me, fuck me now, right now—*

"Slowly," he reminded her, then dipped his head, kissing the inside of her knee, the soft white of her inner thigh. "Lie back. Let me do everything."

Reluctantly she reclined, but stayed propped on her elbows so she could watch him, marveling at how different everything was. His mouth was so warm, his breath on her skin even more so. Hands gentle, exploring.

"Do you like this?" he asked, and all she could do was nod, no breath in her lungs to reply. Had he ever been this gentle, in all the years they'd been together? Had he even once asked her what she wanted?

It was like being with a stranger, this mortal with her Javier's beautiful, expressive face. A changeling left in his place.

Maybe he'd never asked because he'd known he couldn't give her what she wanted in her heart. If only I could have loved him like he loved me, she thought, the candles shimmering a little as she blinked away tears. If I hadn't been so in love with death, he might have always looked at me like this.

She wished he'd kiss her, but she knew why he didn't. The taste of his mouth, his tongue, would send her spinning off the edge, and she'd need his throat, his blood. Just the man-scent of him made her eyes go green-gold: warm skin and sweat, salty-sweet, intoxicating. So full of life . . . And the way he looked at her as he skinned off his shirt, tossing it aside and unbuttoning the too-loose jeans, letting them slide off his slim hips—like he couldn't take his eyes off her.

Suddenly shy, something she'd never seen in him, something she remembered only mortal men doing, glancing away when the last piece of clothing fell. She remembered doing it herself, scared whatever man she was with would find her lacking: too fat, too thin, not pretty enough, her breasts too small, not full enough . . . It plucked at a forgotten part of her, seeing him like that, realizing how different he was now. No vampire sureness. No immortal pride. Just that mortal shyness, naked and aroused, his body saying it all: *I want you, Urs.*

For so long now with him, it was always fast and harsh, his body suddenly hard against hers, mouths and hands urgent, tearing at each other's clothes, then his hands in her hair, forcing her head back as he drove his fangs in. No gentleness. All they had was lust, brutal and quick, both going for the blood, the release. Had it always been like that? She couldn't remember. There'd been so many years when she'd just drifted along, only half-aware of him, of Screed or the others they'd run with. She'd wanted death so much that, when it didn't come, when she had to keep living, she simply folded in on herself and shut everything else out. Opened her legs or tipped her head back, what did it matter? She just let them fuck her in whatever way they wanted. Nothing had changed when he brought her across. It would just go on forever.

But this Javier's body was warm against hers, soft tickle of hair, prickle of his beard as he kissed her breasts, her belly, tongue like a soft lick of flame. This mortal body, this mortal man, smelling of life and beating blood and breath . . . smelling too of the death inside him, that mortality she longed for. The death he'd refused to give her. He would now, this Javier who wasn't Javier, this beautiful mortal changeling. He'd fill her with his life, with his blood, and he'd change her. Take this everlasting darkness away from her.

She wanted to watch him, watch his face, but found she could only lie back on the bed, hands clenched in the sheets so she wouldn't touch him. "You don't have to—" she said in a gasping voice.

He lifted his head briefly. "I want to."

"The sun—" she started to say, instinct telling her the first rays were lighting the eastern sky.

"It's safe," he assured her, sliding his hands under her rump, kissing her again. The words hummed through her like a caress. "Don't worry . . ."

Blood tears were streaming down her cheeks by the time he moved up to kneel between her trembling thighs. He used his fingers to wipe the dark streaks away. "I'm sorry, Urs," he whispered. "I never meant to hurt you."

"I know," she whispered back as he slid inside her, filling her with his heat, his beautiful living heat. "Oh, Javier . . ."

23

". . . the end of laughter and soft lights . . .
the end of nights we tried to die . . ."

Five flights of twisty-turny steep little stairs didn't do Tracy's broken ribs any good whatsoever, and she finally had to sit down and rest, wondering just how high she really was. Or where she was. The church was a maze, abandoned in mid-renovation probably ten years before, drop cloths and scaffolding and plywood everywhere. This must be some back stairway leading to the choir loft, she realized. But wouldn't a loft be open to the rest of the church?

She gave the knob a tentative turn . . . locked. *Come on, Nick,* she thought, frowning down the long narrow turning stairwell. *Where the hell are you?* She'd considered bringing the cell phone up, but when she realized Urs would hear her if she tried to use it, she'd left it on the bed downstairs where she'd found it.

She really wished she had her gun. There was nothing she could do without either Nick or the loaded-for-vampire Glock except get herself killed if she went through that last door. Were they even in there? She couldn't hear anything.

Pressing her ear against the wood, she became aware of two things, neither immediately: the smell of fresh latex paint, and a knocking sound. What *was* that . . . ?

It was a rhythmic thumping, like something—a piece of furniture maybe—bumping up against a wall. Then she heard a woman's voice but not a woman; the sound was more like a deep, purring growl of an animal.

All of a sudden it clicked into place, her face flushing as she understood. With a sharp intake of breath, she backed away from the door, knowing exactly why Vachon had left a trail of crumbs he'd thought she couldn't follow.

* * *

"She's here!" Shannon cried excitedly, diving down towards the main door of the church. "In here!"

"This way—" Nick called, heading him off toward the hidden lower entrance without a minute to spare, the sun already rising.

The sharp tang of chemicals struck them the second they came through the door. Nick went unerringly to the bloodspot on the doorframe. "It's Vachon's," he said tightly. A few steps led him to the next spot, and he immediately understood. "He's left a trail! If anyone else shows up, I've gone upstairs, following it."

* * *

Some soft, out-of-place sound wrenched Urs out of a floating, delicious spell. Outside— "What was that?"

She opened her eyes just as Vachon's arm was coming up in an arc, his hand still hidden behind the side of the bed. Holding something. Guilt and shock flashed across his face.

"What's this?" Urs hissed. "Someone at the door, Javier? Little Tracy and the cavalry, maybe?"

He didn't hesitate. The gun came up and he pulled the trigger even as she was twisting out of the way. The bullet ripped through the pillow where her head had been a second before, filling the room with the smell of burnt feathers. With a curse, he squeezed the trigger again.

Ears ringing, Urs struck out wildly, hampered by the fact that he was on top of her, and the shot went blasting through the ceiling. "You bastard!" she snarled, eyes flaring red. "I should have known it was all a lie!"

She caught his wrist as he brought the gun round, aiming for her head again, and she squeezed the bones together, snapping them like twigs in her grip. His fingers stayed locked round the gun, tears of pain leaking from his eyes. "I won't let you do this—" he gasped, pulling the trigger a third time.

* * *

"Tracy!" Nick cried as he landed beside her. "I heard a shot—"

At the same moment, a three-inch hole blew through the door. "Special load—" Tracy gasped as they both flinched, Nick's eyes flaring gold. "Come on—"

Together they threw their weight against the door, once, twice—The third shot exploded, followed by an unearthly howl of tearing metal that made them both jump. "Once more!" Nick growled, and they rammed the door again.

It burst inward, spilling them inside. Tracy let out a soundless whoop, all her breath gone when she hit. Nick sprang back into the hallway with a snarl, his arm smoking. "The sun—!"

Sprawled on the floor, unable to breathe, Tracy was frozen. The bed was littered with shards of multicolored glass, the morning sun streaming through the huge shattered stained-glass window above it. It wasn't metal shrieking, but Urs, caught in the sunlight when Vachon put a bullet through the painted glass.

It is the choir loft, Tracy realized. He must have been here all day, hanging drop cloths, painting the windows, making it look like a closed-in room. With the dark and the candles—not to mention the other distractions—Urs hadn't seen it. "Vachon!" Tracy panted, hugging her aching ribs. "Vachon, let her go! Get out!"

In the same moment, the smoldering sheets burst into flames. Urs, her hair a crown of fire, her skin bubbling and blistering, suddenly quit trying to get away from Vachon and grabbed his hair, yanking his head to one side. Her lips skinned back over her fangs and she hissed like a snake as she struck. "I won't let you have him—"

"The cross, Tracy—" Vachon managed to cry. Then Urs was at his throat, sucking his life away in great gulping swallows.

Tracy jerked the rosary out from beneath her sweater and held it up before her, driving Urs back. "Let him go!" she shouted. "Let him go, you murdering bitch!"

With a snarl, Urs lifted her head from Vachon's throat. "*Tracy*!" Nick cried. "Get out of the way—" From the safety of the hallway, he drew a bead on Urs, squeezing off three quick shots.

With a bubbling animal scream, Urs jerked backwards, letting go of Vachon to claw at the stinging bullet wounds. He tumbled off the bed, sprawling on the glass-littered floor, his torn throat spurting blood. He still managed to grope his way to the gun before Urs, flames licking her body, could reach Tracy.

"No," Vachon said hoarsely, lifting the gun with both hands, shaking. "I'm so sorry, Urs—"

A red explosion of blood and bone painted the wall opposite the bed. Urs, half her skull blown away, the rest of her nearly consumed by flames, seemed to stare at him for a stunned moment. Then she topped bonelessly to the floor, burning.

"Tracy!" Nick shouted. "Drag him out here, out of the sun!"

There was a whistling sound behind him. He turned to find Shannon depositing a wide-eyed and breathless Natalie on the landing. "You said point the way to anybody who showed up," the young vampire said. "I figured this was fastest."

"My God—!" Natalie exclaimed, hurrying into the wreckage of the room to help Tracy with Vachon. Together they dragged him into the hallway.

"It's all my fault—" Tracy probably didn't even know she was sobbing, her breath coming in painful gasps. Her face was nearly as white as Vachon's. "Help him—" she panted. "Natalie—"

Natalie shot a worried glance at Nick, not having to tell him how bad it was: Vachon had full-depth burns down the entire length of his body, every inch that had been touching Urs; half his blood was gone and his heart was trying to push the rest of it out of the torn punctures on his neck. "Tracy, I don't think there's . . ."

"No!" Tracy cried, turning wild eyes on Nick. "You can bring him across, Nick! If Urs hadn't heard me, none of this would have happened. Nick, please! Do it! You know it's what he wanted—he never wanted to be mortal!"

Nick flinched back, his face stark. "Tracy, how can you ask—"

"No . . ." The whispering voice made them all turn. "Trace . . . not your fault. Still would've . . . shot out the window. I meant to do it . . ."

Tracy begged, "No, Vachon! You wanted her to bring you across—Nick can—"

He was shaking his head violently. "No—" he said again, nearly choking on the blood bubbling in his throat. "I want to die—"

"Vachon, no!" Tracy cradled his burned face against her breast. "Don't say that!"

"What I did . . . That girl, I can't . . ." A violent shivering overtook him, but he doggedly went on: ". . . can't forget . . ."

"You didn't know!" Tracy was sobbing, her face twisted with sorrow. "Vachon, *please*—!"

The shivering intensified, becoming tremors. ". . . just want it to end . . ."

Natalie put two fingers gently on the pulse at his throat. Mutely, she looked at Nick. Her eyes said it all: there was nothing she could do.

In Tracy's arms, Vachon suddenly stiffened, his eyes going wide. She hugged him fiercely, her ear by his whispering mouth. "I know," she said in reply to something only she could hear. "I know you do . . . I love you too, Vachon . . . Always. *Always*."

He uttered a little sigh, his body going still. "Vachon?" she pleaded. "Oh, *don't* . . . ! Don't do this . . . !"

Natalie pressed her lips together, her fingers still at Vachon's pulse. "Just barely," she sighed. "Tracy, it's no good . . ."

Tracy suddenly gasped, turned tear-filled eyes on Nick. "Can you make him hear you?" she demanded. "Nick! Can you hypnotize him?"

"Hypnotize him? Yes, I . . . I suppose, but why—"

"Do it!" she cried, gripping Vachon's nearly lifeless body so tightly he gave a soft moan. "Tell him to forget! Tell him—" Her expression was raw. "—tell him there was an accident. The plane went down, a bomb—tell him to forget *everything*, even me. Do it, Nick. Do it, please, before it's too late."

Natalie set a trembling hand on Nick's wrist. "Do it," she said, tears streaming down her face. "If it were you . . .! Do it, Nick."

Nick took a shuddering breath, putting his hands on Vachon's blistered cheeks. "Vachon, listen to me . . ." he began. "You were on a plane to Edmonton. There was a bomb. The plane went down. You were terribly injured . . ." He glanced up at Tracy, and at Natalie. "Shannon, take them downstairs," he said in an unsteady voice. "I don't want them to be here. I don't even know if I can do it without—"

Shannon's eyes went wide in understanding: *without killing him.* Nick nodded tightly. The young vampire put an arm round each woman, pulling them away even when Tracy tried to stay. "Come on," he said, subdued. "He's right."

Nick continued to murmur into Vachon's ear, hurrying now, knowing there were only moments left before Vachon's heart gave up the fight and quit trying to push blood through his veins. *—blood human blood still-living human blood—*He clamped down hard on the beating voice in his head, the hunger. "Urs and Screed were on the plane, too . . . they died . . . you alone survived . . . Forget everything else. Just the plane. Forget . . ."

There was a tiny flicker across Vachon's face, a softening, and he let go of the memories, releasing them in a breath. ". . . forget . . ."

Nick quickly tore open his wrist, letting the blood flow. It made it easier, that soft pain. "Forgive me—" he whispered, putting his mouth to Vachon's throat, almost a kiss. "Forgive me for this—" He closed his eyes, letting his fangs slide down with a silky, swelling heat. *Don't let me hurt him please don't let me kill him . . .*

The bite was almost tender, his teeth piercing the skin quickly, apologetically. In Nick's arms, Vachon shuddered slightly, trying with his last breath to pull away.

Nick took one quick gulp, almost the last blood left. A thousand sensations flooded him, memories of salt sea and fighting and sunlight, guitar music and stamping feet, a woman's lips at his throat pulling his life out of him, giving hers in return, the sun blazing around her like the sky itself was on fire. In midst of it all was Tracy. Tracy, tall and golden and waiting, full of trust and hope. Trusting Nick to bring Vachon back to her . . .

That trust made him pull away, quickly putting his wrist to Vachon's lips. "It's all right," Nick promised as Vachon tried to turn his head away. "You're safe now . . ."

He let his head fall back against the wall, his eyes closing as Vachon gave in, swallowing. As his lips moved against Nick's skin, the soft stubble tickling, all Nick could think of was Natalie, the unborn child in her womb, soon to be at her breast. This newborn child, at his wrist.

Everything had come full circle, Vachon and Lacroix and Natalie and Tracy all swirling and beating in his blood like a wild song. With a sigh, he cradled Vachon's head against his chest. In their shared memory, the sun pouring through the shattered stained glass window was glorious, cleansing.

24

"Touch me, baby, can't you see that I am not afraid?
What was that promise that you made?"

The band had just finished a slow bluesy ramble and the dancers on the little square of hardwood in the middle of the bar still swayed, loath to stop moving just yet. "More—" someone called hopefully, but the singer, Jojo's more cheerful and far more talented replacement, just smiled and shook his head. His hands at his throat pantomimed "dying of thirst!"

Beau, drumsticks still pattering on his thighs, hopped off his stool and said into the abandoned mike, "We'll be back in a bit, folks."

"Hey, Cowboy," Randy called, a wide grin splitting his boyish face, "why don't you show 'em what you can do?"

Nick groaned inwardly. He'd been trying to get Natalie to sit down for the past three songs. Much as he loved dancing with her—and her now-enormous belly—at the rate she was going, she'd have the baby in the middle of the dance floor. Randy turned to the crowd, appealing, "Anybody wanna hear the Cowboy play something special?"

Natalie, never the shy one, put her fingers to her lips and blew a shrill whistle that made Nick cringe. "Cow-*boy*!" she whooped, turning towards the table where Lacroix and Shannon were sitting. "Come on, you guys! Cow-*boy*! Cow-*boy*!" The cry was taken up by a few of the dancers, and someone started clapping. Shannon, whose adoring gaze followed Natalie like a puppy, eagerly took up the chant, but Lacroix merely sat back looking amused.

"I'm sitting down," Nick informed his wife. As he flopped down in a chair beside Lacroix, he sighed, "I can dress her up, but I can't take her out!"

"Amazing, isn't it?" Lacroix murmured, nodding at the two men on stage: the skinny youth with half a beard and a huge grin, and the dark-haired Spaniard.

Nick nodded, feeling the warm wash of pride from Vachon, the exhilaration of performing. Just for a moment they were alone in an empty warehouse, Vachon a thin, wasted ghost, Nick a mortal man torn between his job and his heart. Then he blinked and, as Vachon picked up an old acoustic guitar and settled himself on the chair Randy pushed toward him, the ghost vanished.

If he prepared at all, it was by taking a breath, blowing it out, and shaking back his hair. Then his fingers began to fly over the strings, plucking out a staccato flamenco melody. The wild, passionate sound danced and stamped, clapping and shouting, the nondescript old bar transformed into a sun-washed bodega warm with the smells of red wine and spicy meat and paella. Next year, Nick promised himself, smiling. Next year, he'd take Natalie and the baby to Europe and they'd sit in that glorious hot Spanish sun together.

The dancers stood transfixed, awed, but when Vachon began slapping the rhythm on the worn wooden front of the guitar, stamping his foot and singing with Gypsy abandon, they erupted into crazy whirling, stomping movement.

"Natalie! No!" Nick sprang up to drag Natalie back to the table, but she grabbed his hands with a musical laugh and spun him in circles, giggling.

"Oh, look!" she suddenly said, stopping to point. "Tracy did come, after all! Tracy! Over here!"

Ever since Vachon had recovered, he'd been asking to meet Nick's partner. He'd accepted Nick's version of events—that he'd been playing with the band off and on for the past year, that he'd been heading to Edmonton with Urs and Screed to scout out some western gigs when the plane crashed. He even accepted the suggestion that his injuries has caused him to lose some time, some memories. But because of their bloodlink, he could feel Nick's connection with Tracy, that more-than-friends loyalty of partners. And he wanted to meet her. Couldn't understand why Nick kept putting it off, finding excuses. When the band got this, their first opening gig, he'd insisted Nick invite her to come. What he couldn't know was that Tracy herself had been avoiding the inevitable, not sure if she could see him, talk to him, without falling to pieces.

But there she was, standing on the edge of the dance floor watching him play. Looking like a ghost herself, lost and pale in a shapeless white sweatshirt and faded jeans, her shoulder-length hair pulled back in a ponytail. Nick suspected she could feel that Spanish sun just like he could. Maybe even more so. As Vachon finished the piece with a flourish, Nick tugged on Natalie's hand, waving Tracy over. "Let's go sit down."

Tracy slipped into an empty chair between Natalie and Lacroix. "He looks good," she said to no one in particular. Her voice was a little shaky, but she gave Nick a wan smile as if to say *I'll be okay*.

Randy headed for the table where Beau and the singer were cozying up to their girls, and as Vachon approached their own crowded table, Nick and Shannon both got up in search of an empty chair. When everyone was seated again, Nick was surprised to see Vachon beside Tracy. It was a toss-up as to whether Shannon or Natalie had engineered this outcome: both were hopeless romantics. Then he saw the smug smile on Lacroix's face and remembered the old dragon had been sitting beside Tracy before the game of musical chairs began.

"No time like the present to face the inevitable, Nicholas," Lacroix murmured pleasantly. "It will be fine. Quit fidgeting."

"You, too," Natalie advised her belly sternly. "No fandangos in there, you hear me?" She saw Vachon avidly staring and leaned back in her chair. "Go ahead," she invited with a grin. "I'm like one of those good-luck Buddhas—right here."

Vachon tentatively laid his hand on the spot she indicated and, from his wide-eyed reaction, must have been rewarded with a mighty kick. "Wow!" he breathed. He grinned at Natalie, and at Nick. "That's great. Fantastic!"

Still grinning, he turned to Tracy. "You must be Tracy. I've been wanting to—"

The words died in his mouth, his expression bemused. A long moment passed, then: "I *know* you," he said in wonder. "I remember you."

Tracy glanced in panic to Nick, who quickly intervened. "Vachon, I can explain—"

Lacroix put a finger to his lips, one penciled brow crooked in curiosity. "Hush, Nicholas," he said. "No more interference. Let them be."

Vachon's eyes were wider than ever, darting over Tracy's face, her hair, her mouth. "You were with someone," he said slowly, the ghost of a smile lifting his lips. "A black man? 'He's stone cold, Tracy.' He was talking to you. At the crash site." The smile lit his face with delight. "*You* found me! After the crash—I remember you knelt beside me, you said . . . I can't remember . . . 'This one's alive'? And then Nick must have come." He caught her hands in his, squeezing them, emotion filling his eyes. "My God, I remember your voice, your hands, you smelled like fruit, like apricots and calla lilies, and your face was like an angel's. You were an angel, my own angel. You saved my life."

Tracy gave a rather unangel-like snort, starting to smile. "You're full of it, Vachon!"

"Probably." He grinned back at her, not in the least insulted. "Your hair's longer . . ." His expression softened then, his tongue moistening his lips, perhaps tasting apricots in the small distance between them. Then he reached up, his fingers brushing her cheek.

She flinched back with a gasp. "Don't—"

"Shh . . ." he told her gently as he unclipped the barrette in her hair to let it spill like bright water over her shoulders. "I'll never hurt you, Tracy," he promised. "You should know that."

end

"Gabriel McFarlane" is the pseudonym that Jena Snyder, the Production Editor of On Spec Magazine, uses for publishing on the Net.

Everything I Need To Know About Life, I Learned From Vachon

by Bonnie Purdoe

- ➥ Cocktail umbrellas hold the secrets of the universe
- ➥ Always fight with the underdog—it's more exciting when you don't know if you're going to win
- ➥ Spanish is the only romance language
- ➥ Irresponsibility is an art which takes an eternity to perfect
- ➥ Why brush your hair when you can get someone else to do it for you
- ➥ Always keep a spare on hand, just in case
- ➥ Irreverence doesn't make you a bad person
- ➥ Promises made under duress don't count
- ➥ Candles give off the most flattering light
- ➥ Bangs are sexy
- ➥ Chicks dig leather, motorcycles, and guys in black
- ➥ Always keep your flashbacks to yourself
- ➥ The best reason to do anything is because you can
- ➥ If the building's abandoned—move in!
- ➥ Cell phones are a *good* thing
- ➥ Always make friends with someone who'll let you use their shower
- ➥ Cars are sexier with fins
- ➥ Always take the law of Conservation of Energy to the extreme
- ➥ Amputation is no big deal, but those little hypodermics can be murder
- ➥ Long, slow camera shots of "guitars" can be very inspiring

The Other Side of Life

by J.S. Levin

"Knight. Vetter. In my office."

Nick sighed and got to his feet. He knew what this was about, and was just about as happy as Reese seemed to be. Behind him, Tracy pulled herself out of her chair and followed him into the Captain's office.

"Close the door," Reese told them. Nick did, then took up his usual position, leaning against the wall with his arms folded. Tracy just stood in the middle of the room, like a mechanical doll that had run down. "Vetter, sit down."

She did. Her face showed only resignation. Like her partner, she had a pretty good idea what this was about. Too bad she didn't care.

Reese, as usual, went straight to the point. "Vetter, what the hell is the matter with you? For the last month, you've been dragging around with all the zip of a hearse. Mind tellin' me what's going on?"

After a long minute, she sighed. "It's . . . it's personal, Cap. Just . . . some personal problems."

"Your dad's been off your back—and mine, thank heaven—for over two months now. Your Mom's staying in Montreal." He seemed to be reviewing her family. "Boyfriend?"

She swallowed hard and shook her head, not daring to look up.

"Hmm. Well, look, the bottom line is this: I need you here, mentally and physically, when you are on the job. Get it?" He waited until she nodded. "Good. Cause if you're not careful, you're gonna get yourself—and your partner—into a world of trouble. Nick, I wanted you in here to tell you that if you aren't a hundred percent sure that Tracy's on the ball, you send her back to the station or send her home."

Tracy's head snapped up at that. "That's not fair, Cap. I do my job."

"You can't do your job moping around and staring off into space, Tracy. That's what I mean. You start daydreaming, and you'll end up in Natalie's Bed and Breakfast."

"I'll keep an eye on her, Captain," Nick assured him quietly.

"Yeah, well, that might be a bit difficult, Knight." Reese tapped a folder on his desk. "See this? It's a request from Vice. They liked your work the last time you went undercover, Vetter, and they want to use you again. It ties into that string of gang murders you two have been working on."

"Now, I like the fact that another department thinks so well of my people that they beg to borrow 'em. I don't mind anybody owing me favors. But I am not going to send you out on a job like this knowing that you aren't watching where the hell you put your feet! Do I make myself clear?"

Tracy nodded. "Yes, Captain."

She straightened her shoulders and asked, tentatively, "Can I take the job?"

Reese shook his head. "First sign of interest I get out of you in a month, and it's for something more likely to kill you. Yeah, you can take the job. But damn it, Vetter, you get your head on straight and watch yourself. Nick, you work with Vice as back-up; you know the drill. This gang stuff stinks, and these bastards are playin' for keeps."

Nick nodded. "We'll be careful. Thanks, Cap. I've had about enough of these cases myself."

"I've had more than enough. Get 'em off my desk, Knight."

"You got it." The blond detective grinned, and gestured to his partner. "Shall we see what Vice has cooked up for you this time?"

She rose, determined. "Sure. Let's go."

Looking back over her shoulder, she added, "Sorry, Captain."

"Just be careful," Reese repeated.

❑❑❑❑❑

". . . and I know what the problem is," Nick told Natalie, "but I can't talk to her about it, because I'm not supposed to know."

"Vachon," guessed the coroner, stirring a beaker with a spoon. "There. Try this."

He took the beaker gingerly, eyeing the murky liquid with obvious distaste. He sniffed it, then held it out at arms' length. "Ugh. How do you expect me to drink something that I can't even stand the smell of?"

"Willpower," she replied with a grin. "By holding your nose and thinking of sunshine. C'mon, Nick, it's not that bad."

"You drink it, if you think so." He set it aside and continued, "I think Vachon hasn't been around to see Tracy since he got over the plague, Nat. Which means *she* doesn't know he survived it."

She frowned. "Well, isn't that for the best? I mean, you didn't want her knowing about vampires anyway. Now, of the two vampires she really knew, one is dead and she thinks the other one is."

He shook his head. "I don't know."

He stared thoughtfully off into space, and Nat took advantage of his distraction to press the beaker back into his hand. He sighed, raised it and touched his lips to it, making an apparently heroic effort to swallow a sip. Natalie grinned. He always made such a big deal about it.

However, the spasms and retching which followed almost immediately were not the least bit funny. After he had rinsed his mouth out in the sink, she said, "I'm sorry, Nick. I guess we'll just have to make note of the fact that if you think it smells bad, it probably is bad."

"I thought it always worked that way," he muttered. "At least, that's how I *remember* checking to see if food was edible."

She poured the concoction down the drain. "Yeah, well."

"Nat, I'm worried about Tracy."

She nodded. "I know. Me, too. If she's this broken up, Nick, maybe you'd better tell her."

"It's too dangerous."

She set the empty beaker down so hard she almost broke it. "You know, I have heard entirely too much of that! I think it's incredibly chauvinistic of you to *decide* for Tracy—and me, while we're at it—what it's *safe* for us to know. The world is *not safe*, Nick, and we are not your Thirteenth Century damsels who need to be protected from it."

He found himself backed against the lab bench.

"I know that . . ." he began.

"Yeah, well, it doesn't seem to have sunk in. Tracy is your partner, Nick. Not some frail flower you have to protect. In the right circumstances, she could be saving your immortal butt! You can't continually keep her in the dark—it's going to get both of you killed some day."

"If I tell Tracy that I know Vachon's alive, I have to tell her *how* I know," the blond vampire pointed out. "Because it would be just too complicated any other way."

"You've told her you've used him as a snitch," she shot back. "Just mention you saw him on the street or something."

He shook his head. "No. You didn't see them, Nat, the night I brought him the cure. She'd never believe he'd get well and simply go about his business and never get in contact with her."

"She's in love with him." It was a warning as much as a statement.

"They're in love with each other," he amended wryly. "Which is even worse."

That was the last straw. Hurricane Natalie broke loose.

"Why?!" she demanded. "Why is it so bad? Why must you play these stupid games of lies and secrets! She already goes to the Raven, Nick. So did I, until Janette disappeared. Bet you I can pick out ninety percent of the vampires there, too. I'll bet Tracy's every bit as good. She's a *detective*, Nick, it's her job to put things together. *You've* been luckier than you deserve. She hasn't figured you out. She hasn't died from one of your stunts—or from trying to save you from something you didn't need saving from!"

She took a deep breath. "I've had enough of this. Either you tell her; or the next time I see her, I will."

"Nat!"

"No, Nick. This has gone on more than long enough. You have no idea how grating it is to stand by and watch you play at your manipulations. Tracy's an *adult* human being, and she deserves to be treated like one. I'm *tired* of it."

"Natalie, it's for her own safety. The Enforcers . . ."

She poked a finger under his nose. "Look, she could be just as dead from what she knows already. What difference does it make—except to keep her from killing herself in despair, because it hurts too much to think about living with Vachon dead. Or doesn't that matter?"

He caught her shoulders. "Of course it matters. Nat, I . . . I don't know. I don't want to hurt her, but I don't want to wave a red flag at the Enforcers, either. Because if they come after Tracy and Vachon, they come after you and me, too."

She held his eyes with her own. "Don't you think I know that?"

❑❑❑❑❑

It was, for a week night, reasonably busy at the Raven. The music was canned tonight, and the floor held a scattering of dancers. Nick pushed through the thicker crowd around the edge, looking for his partner, whom he was relieved not to find; and secondly, for his master. LaCroix had not yet started his show for the evening, and was perfectly content to spend a few minutes confounding the most wayward of his children.

"Do have something to drink, Nicholas," he urged. "It really does bother me to have you standing there, obviously hungry and playing the martyr."

Nick sighed. He was hungry, and the scent from LaCroix's glass was enticing. "I can't; I'm . . ."

"On duty. Yes, yes. However, my boy, not everything in the reserve cellar has wine in it, you know." He gestured to the bartender, and leaned forward to give an order.

A moment later, a tall glass of the sort used for non-alcoholic beverages was set at Nick's elbow. The smell was pure human blood, and it was warm. The younger vampire swallowed hard.

"Damn you, LaCroix." He turned away resolutely.

"Really, Nicholas. How much good will you do yourself—or your lovely young partner—if you are starving? No mortals died to provide that glass," his master continued softly. "No one was even hurt. Free consent, freely given. Why do you turn your back on it?"

He couldn't.

"Just this once," he whispered, picking up the glass. It warmed his hands as he raised it, breathing in the scent. Reverently, he touched his lips to it.

The glass was empty when he set it down.

"More?" asked LaCroix solicitously.

"No. Not right . . . no." Nick sat down, forcing himself to concentrate on the reason he'd come here. LaCroix had seen the cracks in his armor, when they'd both been sick with the plague. It hadn't escaped his master's notice (though he'd said nothing about it) that Nick had taken his wineglass out of his hand, gulping the bloodwine down with something very close to desperation. Now he was taking great glee in widening those cracks, oh so gently. "You mentioned my partner. Does she come here a lot?"

"Ah." LaCroix ran a finger around the edge of his wineglass. "Yes, now that you mention it, she has become something of a . . . regular. I believe she admires our taste in music."

"Or musicians," Nick pointed out. "How about Vachon?"

"Hmm, no, I can't say I've seen much of young Javier in the past few weeks. I understand he lost his companion, the carouche." The elder vampire gave his offspring a long look, before dropping his eyes to his wineglass as he raised it. "I believe I can understand his feelings."

"You think he's gone off somewhere . . ."

"To mourn, Nicholas. And why not? As the carouche go, Screed was a veritable prince. And apparently they had something of a history together." He sipped his wine. "Why such concern?"

"It's Tracy," Nick admitted.

"Yes, I've noticed," LaCroix agreed smoothly. "There's something very . . . enticing about her desperation; her despair."

Nick frowned.

"LaCroix . . ." he began threateningly.

His master raised a hand. "Surprising as it may seem—and it surprises me, so I'm certain you are astonished—I have been keeping . . . an eye on your little partner. She's in no danger—within the club. However, I cannot be everywhere, and neither can you. If she is determined to walk into the arms of death, I can assure you that someone, somewhere, will be delighted to oblige her. You know this, Nicholas; I shouldn't have to tell you."

"Natalie thinks I should tell her," Nick admitted, wondering even as he said it why he was telling his master these things.

"Ahh." LaCroix poured himself more wine and drank. "Tell her that her Spaniard is alive? Tell her, perforce, how you know?"

"Yes." Another glass had appeared at Nick's elbow. Without even a show of resistance, he picked it up, letting it warm his hands as he slowly sipped at it.

Free consent. Freely given.

"It seems that, yet again, the good doctor and I seem to be on the same side," mused LaCroix, after a moment. "I believe she is right. Your partner is already standing on the edge of the Community, Nicholas. Not even a full step, and she is in our midst. Even as your charming Natalie. She does not deserve to be kept in ignorance."

☐☐☐☐☐

For almost three weeks, Toronto's underworld had been a war zone. The files on Nick and Tracy's desks piled up: three drug dealers, dead in a drive-by shooting. Two prostitutes, apparently knifed by disgruntled johns. A teenage runner, shot execution-style. A pimp and his main girl, found together in the back of a warehouse. He'd died of an overdose; she, tied up in a deathly embrace to his corpse, had suffocated.

"We know it's all linked together," Lieutenant Vanderveer told them. "And if we can just get the evidence, it'll wipe your case load and ours in one fell swoop."

"Where do we fit in?" Nick asked.

"You, in the background for right now, Knight. You're part of the available but inconspicuous. Tracy's our key."

"Me?" the younger detective looked shocked. "I don't understand. I mean, I know you think I did a good job on the escort service case, but . . ."

"You did a great job," Nick corrected her. "You saved my life."

She bristled. "Okay, you've made your reminder of the month."

He grinned. "That's more like it."

"So what do I do?"

It seemed that another escort service might be involved in the present series of crimes. Two of the dead women were known to be from the service, and as Tracy already had a "track record" with another agency, it was a reasonable cover.

But Tracy couldn't help remembering how Vachon, in an effort to protect her, had almost ruined that previous cover. Her eyes grew distant, and she barely listened as Vanderveer explained what he wanted her to do.

"Got it, Vetter?" the Lieutenant demanded. From the tone of voice, Tracy deduced it was not the first time he'd asked.

"Uh, yeah, Lieutenant. No problem."

"Good. Check in before you go out, then every three hours—and I mean it. People are dying out there. You are not going to be one of them. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

He nodded. "Knight, you two go over every detail before she goes out, do *you* understand? No miscommunications."

Nick nodded. "No problem, Lieutenant. We'll check back with you soon."

"Good. I want this over with."

"That makes it unanimous," the vampire detective agreed.

❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑

Once away from the Vice Department, he turned to Tracy. "Yoo-hoo, Tracy? Where are you?"

"What?"

"Tracy, weren't you listening?"

"To what, Nick? Vanderveer of Vice," she mused. "I wonder if he ever thinks about switching jobs? That's almost too much."

"Tracy." Nick caught her shoulder and swung her around. "Look at me. You aren't listening."

"Yes I am, Nick," she insisted, without much enthusiasm. "Wonder if I've still got that leather miniskirt?"

He released her with a frustrated sigh. "You are going to get yourself killed."

She didn't answer, just looked at him, then turned away and continued walking down the hall.

❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑

The owner of Lioness Escorts said her name was Marlena Hepburn, which was so terribly overdone it might even be true. Certainly, she could stand up to the name. Taller than Tracy, with auburn hair and icy gray eyes, she was beautiful, cool, and undeniably professional.

Tracy had decided, in a rare moment of lucidity, that she was tired of being the Nice Girl. Her role, therefore, was also the cool professional. Being an escort, she explained to Ms. Hepburn, was simply a stepping stone. She was made for bigger things, and perfectly ready to take her opportunities as they arose.

Ms. Hepburn applauded her initiative. "That's excellent, my dear. I can see that you and I should have a long and profitable career together. Now, then, let's see what we have in the way of assignments . . ."

She turned to her computer screen. "Oh, yes; here's something. Tracy, how would you like to accompany me to a business meeting?"

"Sure," Tracy agreed. "What kind of business?"

"Ours, actually. The possibility exists to, oh, expand our horizons, my dear. As you say, we must take opportunities as they arise. Timing is everything. I've been working quite hard on arranging an . . . introduction to the right people." She nodded decisively. "I'll need you to meet me about seven-thirty. Dress for an upscale business dinner."

❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑

They stood on the street corner, waiting for the cab Marlena had called. Tracy looked around, noting Nick's Caddy just down the street; then spotted her partner himself, apparently looking over the goods in a store window. He seemed to feel her eyes on him, for he glanced up briefly before strolling on to the next shop.

Tracy commented to her new employer, "So, are we actually going to dinner, or is that just an excuse for a business meeting with our stomachs rumbling?"

Marlena chuckled. "Oh, we're going to dinner, all right. Italian. *Their* choice. And of course, they insist on buying."

She shook her head. "Sometimes, it amazes me how they buy into their own cliches . . . Ah, look, I believe that's our cab."

They moved closer to the curb. The cabbie spotted them, and began to maneuver his vehicle over. Suddenly, a car tore out of its parking place and swung between the cab and its intended passengers.

Reacting on a cop's sixth sense, Tracy dove for the sidewalk, dragging Marlena down with her as shots rang out and glass shattered over their heads. She heard Marlena scream and abruptly fall silent. Then the pain started.

Through the haze, she saw Nick appear in the road, gun clenched in both hands as he aimed and fired. She heard an answering explosion, a squeal of rubber, then nothing.

Nick knelt at her side.

"Tracy, are you . . . damn!" He knelt, gingerly pulling her away from Marlena.

"Marlena?" Tracy asked woozily, looking up at him.

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"Add another notch on your lipstick case," he told her. "She's unconscious, but she's alive; and so are you, no thanks to me again."

He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. "Let me call for an ambulance."

While he was doing that, Tracy pushed herself into a sitting position and assessed the situation. Her left arm was on fire from the single bullet she'd caught. Marlena had taken two, but luckily one was in the shoulder, the other in her thigh. Painful, but survivable. Major organs, bones and arteries appeared to be untouched. She was unconscious apparently from having struck the sidewalk with the full weight of a Vetter behind her. If they hadn't already been heading for the ground, they would both surely have been added to the pile of folders on Reese's desk.

Nick put away the phone.

"Ambulance is on its way," he said soothingly, trying to get her to lie down again.

"I don't want to go to the hospital," she protested, pulling herself to her feet instead.

"I understand that," her partner agreed sympathetically. He also got to his feet, and braced her carefully. "However, there's the slight matter of a bullet in your arm."

"Nick, please."

He looked at her thoughtfully for a long moment, then seemed to come to a decision. "All right. Let's get Ms. Hepburn taken care of, then you come with me."

* * * * *

Natalie looked up as the two detectives limped into her lab.

"Which one of you is it?" she asked.

"Trace," Nick said, depositing his partner on the table. "Left arm."

"So I see. Why aren't you in the emergency room, huh?"

Tracy looked at her. "You can fix it, can't you?"

"Yes, but it's not my job," Natalie pointed out. "You are far too lively to be a patient in *this* doctor's office."

"I know." Tracy slumped limply on the table. "But I didn't want to go to the emergency room . . ."

Nick broke in. "I think it's time we had that talk."

Natalie's eyes widened. "Oh, really?"

"What talk?" Tracy asked, faintly interested. "Natalie . . ."

The coroner gave in. "All right. I'll work. You talk."

"Oh, no, you don't," Nick protested, settling back against the lab bench, as far away from the table as he could get while still being in sight. "You are going to help me."

"Help what?" Tracy demanded. "Ow, Natalie!"

"Hold still a minute," Natalie told her.

Nick stayed silent for several moments, apparently fascinated by the bullet extraction. His jaw clenched as Natalie removed the bullet and blood rolled down Tracy's arm, soaking her sleeve before Natalie could put pressure on it.

Natalie looked over her shoulder, noting his tense posture.

"Well, do you tell her, or shall I?" she challenged.

"What?!" Tracy shrieked. "Will *someone* please tell me what's going on?"

Nick took a step closer. "Tracy. I know . . . what's been bothering you, the past few weeks."

It was her turn to clench her teeth. "Oh, yeah?"

He nodded. "You think Vachon is dead."

Her face turned white; she almost fainted. Natalie caught her. "Easy there."

Over her shoulder, she added sarcastically, "Nice bedside manner, doctor!"

Tracy muttered something, her head bowed on Natalie's shoulder. "What was that?" the coroner asked.

"He is, isn't he." It wasn't a question. It had stopped being a question half a month ago, when she hadn't heard from him in more than ten days.

"No, Trace. He's alive," Natalie answered, when it didn't seem Nick would.

"Or at least," she couldn't help adding, "healthily undead."

That pulled Tracy up straight, even though she bit her lip at the pain. "You . . . you know!"

"Well, yeah," Natalie agreed.

Tracy's eyes narrowed. She looked from the coroner to her partner, who simply stood halfway across the room, looking back at her. Her mind, which had been encased in black mud for a month, seemed to suddenly break loose in a shower of sparks. Memories cascaded; little things that hadn't made sense, that she'd shrugged off, that he'd explained away.

"Nick . . . you bastard! You knew—and you never *told* me! How dare you!"

"Tracy, I couldn't put you in danger—in more danger than you were . . ."

"Let me off this table, Nat," Tracy demanded. "I'm gonna kill him; then I'm gonna find Vachon and . . ."

"Stay put," Natalie replied mildly. "First of all, although I sympathize with wanting to kill Nick, he's really more useful, uh, alive."

"Thank you, Natalie," Nick interjected sarcastically, from a safe distance.

"Secondly," the coroner continued as if she hadn't heard him, "don't be mad at Vachon."

"Why not? He *left* me; I thought he was . . ."

Nick ventured closer, warily.

"Tracy, Vachon's friend Screed didn't make it. From what I've seen, they'd been together—" he sighed "—a long time. Vachon's not going to get over that in a few days. Give him time."

"I don't have his kind of time," his partner protested. "*Your* kind of time, damn you, Nick."

"I'm sure he's even more aware of that than you are, Trace," Nick told her.

Natalie stepped back to survey her handiwork.

"You are going to hate yourself in the morning," she told Tracy. "But I can give you a prescription that'll take the edge off. That arm should be in a sling, but you probably won't leave it there, so I'll simply ask you to *please*, try to keep it elevated and use it as little as possible. Ice for the swelling, but don't get it wet, and get the dressing changed if you do."

Tracy nodded. "Thank, Natalie. For everything. Really."

"I think I'll hang out a new shingle. Instead of 'Natalie's Bed and Breakfast', what do you think of 'Lambert's Creature Clinic'?"

"NO," the partners replied in unison.

Natalie grinned. "Oh, good, you're working together again."

She looked at Tracy narrowly. "I hope this means that Nick can stop worrying about you trying to get yourself killed?"

The younger detective sighed, her shoulders slumping in embarrassment.

"I . . ." She looked up at Nick resolutely. "I'm sorry, Nick. It's just . . . without Vachon . . . there's this *hole* in my life . . ." Her eyes dropped. "I know it sounds . . . well, stupid, I mean I know I hardly knew him—know him—but . . ."

He took pity on her.

"He's important to you. I understand. Look, Tracy, I'll make you a deal. You keep your attention focussed on the case, and I'll do some looking for Vachon." He caught her protest before it formed. "No, Tracy. There's a few places I can look that aren't . . . safe for you. Trust me?"

After a long minute, she nodded. "Yeah. Okay. Deal."

"Good," Natalie broke in. "Now, Nick, take her home before she falls over. It's been a long night already, and . . ." She glanced over to the clock on the wall. "God, it's only one! Get going. I'll see you later."

He nodded and helped his partner off the table. "Okay, Nat. Thanks again."

"Oh, don't worry, buster. It's on my list."

❑❑❑❑❑

Urs came off the Raven's stage after her set, throwing a provocative smile over her shoulder at the young men crowding around the steps. However, she slipped past them, behind the curtains, and the smile faded immediately. The look she threw back at the outside now was a combination of sadness, pain, and frustration.

Nick stepped out of the shadows. "Urs, I need to talk to you."

"I don't know anything," she replied immediately, her soft voice devoid of any real emotion.

"Yes, you do," he insisted. "It's about Vachon."

She shrugged and strode out of the back area, towards a small table where a bottle and glass already awaited her. Pouring out the dark mixture, she tossed it down with a look of distaste and refilled her glass immediately. "What about him?"

"Do you have any idea where he is?"

She raised the glass to her lips. "Despite what you think, Detective, Vachon and I don't exactly keep company."

"I know that," he replied. "But he did bring you across. You must have some feeling for where he is."

Another shrug. "He's here, somewhere. In Toronto."

Nick nodded. That was a start. "Has he been to the Raven recently?"

She shook her blonde head, making her earrings bob and catch the light. "No, not since . . . since Screed . . ."

He touched a hand to her arm. "I'm sorry. You and Screed . . ."

She pulled away. "Let's get one thing straight. I didn't like Screed. He made me . . . uncomfortable. I put up with him because . . . because he and Javier were like a set. You didn't get one without the other."

Urs finished off the bloodwine, and reached for the bottle again. In a much softer voice, she admitted, "I envy him, though. It's over for him."

She sipped from her glass.

"I kept . . . hoping that maybe . . . but it passed me by." She laughed harshly. "Can you imagine that? The one vampire in Toronto that would have welcomed the plague, and it passed me by! Fate is *such* a bitch . . ."

Nick looked at her. It wasn't in him to say "I'm sorry you didn't get sick and die," but at the same time, a part of him understood; the part that had told Natalie, in despair, that maybe dying was the only kind of mortality he'd ever be allowed.

Urs sighed again. "At least I didn't have to be grateful to LaCroix for curing me."

Nick nodded. So that's how LaCroix had done it; in one fell swoop protecting Natalie from potentially dangerous exposure, and tightening his hold on the Community. Returning to the subject at hand, he asked, "Well, if Vachon hasn't been here, do you have any idea where he might be?"

Another shrug. "When he's depressed, he looks for trouble, sometimes. Look down by the wharves—he and Screed. . . ." She took a deep breath and continued resolutely, "Any kind of dive or brothel; nothing high class. And he'll be hunting, too. No bottles for him when he's like this."

Nick's lips narrowed to a hard line. "Killing?"

She shook her head. "No. Javier's got better control than that, Detective."

Nick couldn't help but wonder. "Does he?"

She looked him in the eye for the first time.

"Javier kills when he wants to, or when he's . . . pushed to it. But you have no idea how many of them—" a wave of her hand indicated the mortal patrons of the Raven "—have gone home with him and come back here a couple days later, none the worse for the experience." A rueful smile twisted her lips. "Except maybe that now they're looking for something no mortal lover can ever give them."

"Hmmm." Nick's eyes focussed on something far away. Then he pulled himself back to the present, and said, "Thanks, Urs."

"Sure." Another shrug of one shoulder, and she picked up her glass and wandered away.

He watched her go, then turned and left, not seeing the crowd he pushed through, or hearing the music even though the thunder of bass shook the floor. Outside, he stared for a moment at the black Mercedes that swung up to the door, without registering on it or its occupants. He turned aside and headed for the Caddy.

❑❑❑❑❑

The three gentlemen who entered the Raven were obviously not there for the atmosphere. They observed the crowd with blank faces, neither wincing at the volume of the music nor attracted by it. Their minds were on other things. They made their way to the bar, where the bartender's professional smile quickly wilted under their questions. He swallowed hard and threw a desperate glance at his employer, sitting calmly in his usual place at the back of the bar.

LaCroix noted his employee's distress, and looked over the three intruders calmly, before nodding. The bartender indicated him to the three men, who promptly pushed their way through the patrons to stand before him.

"You're Lucien LaCroix?" the first one asked.

"And if I were?" LaCroix parried, sipping his drink.

"Then you'd want to talk to us," the tallest of the three replied, with much the same irony. "About a . . . business proposition."

The former Roman general looked them over and smiled. "Oh, yes. Of course; a business proposition. Tell me, how many times did you see *Pulp Fiction?*" He gestured. "Please, have a seat. Something to drink? Surely, intimidation is . . . thirsty work?"

The tallest man laughed. "Sure is. Why not?" Then he added, "Seven times in the theater. Then I bought my own copy." He moved to take a seat, but was stopped by the third man.

"That's enough, Bobby. Mr. LaCroix, you may not be aware of it, but there's quite a few . . . changes going on in the . . . business world. We are aware that certain fringe elements and, well, let's call them 'undesirables', have a safe-house in this place of yours. We're also aware that you have some dealings which you would probably not want to come to the attention of the police."

LaCroix took a swallow of his drink. "Oh, no, gentlemen, you quite wrong me. I have a very . . . close relationship with certain members of the police force."

"So you got a couple of cops on the payroll," the first man said. "You still got bodies buried that you don't want 'em digging up."

The pale man raised a white eyebrow. "Is there a reason this cretin still lives?" he asked the other two conversationally.

"I'm beginning to wonder," the leader admitted frankly. "Alfonzo, shut up."

"Mr. Turico, why are we pussyfooting around with this creep? He's just another—"

LaCroix's hand, tightening around Alfonzo's collar, effectively prevented further speech.

"I believe Mr. Turico told you to shut up," the vampire whispered, letting just a hint of the hunter show in his eyes. "It would be wise to take his advice."

He dropped the thug and turned back to the other two. "Let us not play games, gentlemen. I will not be 'shaken down', as I believe the phrase is, nor will I be run out of business. You have no *idea* of the forces *I* can call up if they are needed."

He leaned back, and poured more bloodwine into his glass. It did amuse him to sit here and drink human blood under humans' unseeing eyes and dull noses. Especially these three, who, for all their bluster, would certainly be terrified if they knew the truth.

He looked at them again. Well, Alfonzo would certainly be terrified; really, the man was nothing more than hired muscle—no brains, no finesse. Bobby, on the other hand, had a sense of humor LaCroix could actually appreciate. As for Mr. Turico . . .

"On the other hand," the vampire added softly, "I am not adverse to . . . *business* propositions, should they not run counter to my own plans."

Turico inclined his head.

"I have no authority to make deals," he admitted. "But I'll let the people who do, know. You'll be hearing from us."

"Oh, I have no doubt, Mr. Turico. I have no doubt. *Au revoir.*" Lacroix dismissed them with a raise of his glass. They almost bowed as they left.

A good beginning.

LaCroix drank some more, nodding to himself. This was an excellent wine, its fruitiness mingling well with the heady richness of the blood. He would have to see about getting more.

The three men couldn't just leave; but he'd known that. They would have to make their presence known among the patrons and revive their flagging faith in themselves. He watched impassively as they stared down two scruffy boys who were holding their bloodlusts just barely in check, and nodded as the boys sneered and turned back to their companions, tossing off glasses of deep red with a nonchalance that masked their hunger.

Then a blonde woman in a black leather miniskirt and a blood-red velour body suit caught their attention, and LaCroix's pale eyes narrowed. So, the little Vetter was back again. Too late to keep her out of the thugs' way; he'd just have to make sure there were no . . . incidents. It was not a part of his plans to have Nicholas able to blame him for harm to his human pets.

Besides, Tracy Vetter seemed to be one of the rare few, who, like the maddening Dr. Lambert, was perhaps more than just a pet.

She looked them up and down with commendable aplomb. "Aren't you guys a little overdressed?"

"We ain't here for the atmosphere," Alfonso sneered back, undressing her with his eyes. "Although it sure got better all of a sudden."

She looked down her nose at him, apparently came to the same conclusion LaCroix had, and turned her attention to his companions. "So if you're not here for the atmosphere, why are you here?"

Turico gave her an assessing stare. "Business, lady. Business."

She picked up her glass.

"I'm in business," she told them boldly.

LaCroix, back in his corner, smiled into his own drink. Oh, Nicholas would have a heart attack if he could hear the little Vetter now!

"Yeah, well, I don't think we're interested," Turico told her frankly.

She shrugged. "Oh? And Marlena Hepburn was so sure you would be . . ."

The thug's eyes narrowed. "Then again, maybe we . . . could be."

"Good," Tracy told him. "Because, quite frankly, I think we could have a mutually profitable relationship. I'm on my way up, and Ms. Hepburn has offered to lend me hand. However, she seems to be having some troubles of her own . . ."

Bobby grinned at that one.

"Streets get more dangerous all the time," he agreed. "A girl can't be too careful these days."

"No," Tracy said, carefully masking both rage and fear. Even across the room, LaCroix could feel it. "But I know that the best way to get ahead in business is networking. Contacts. So . . ."

"You've got good contacts with Ms. Hepburn," Turico pointed out.

Another shrug, this one drawing subtle attention to her injured arm, the slight thickening of bandage under the bodysuit.

"Oh, sure, I'm at her elbow. Look how far that's gotten me. Personally, when this is over, I'd much rather be alive and on the winning side." She tossed off the rest of her drink. "Do let the appropriate people know, won't you? I'm really tired of being a target. It's the wrong end of the range for me."

"I'll pass your message along," Turico assured her. He gathered up an admiring Bobby and sullen Alfonzo with his eyes. "Come on, we got work to do."

Tracy watched them go coolly. It wasn't until the door shut behind them that she leaned against the bar and let herself start shaking.

LaCroix gestured to his bartender, and gave a brief order. A fresh drink appeared at Tracy's elbow, and she was halfway through it before it occurred to her to wonder where it was from. She called the bartender over, but he was—obedient to his orders—patently unhelpful, refusing both information and money. After a few moments, she gave in, and turned to watch the crowd, sipping the rest of her drink.

❑❑❑❑❑

The place made the Raven look like Versailles. It was dingy, smoky, dank, and loud. Its customers were exactly the sort of people whom one would expect to like such a place: hard-eyed women and men who earned their pay more by muscle than brains. In the middle of them, leaning on a pool cue and contemplating his next shot, Vachon looked even less reputable than usual. He raised a glass of pale gold liquid to his lips and took a healthy swallow, set it aside, and bent down.

"Five in the side," he announced, "Two banks. Three in the corner."

He would have made it, if Nick hadn't appeared at his elbow. Instead, he scratched, and swore in lurid Spanish as the white ball followed the three into the corner pocket. He turned to the detective and demanded, "What the hell do you think you're doing, Knight?"

"I might ask you the same question," Nick said softly, intercepting the glass as Vachon picked it up again. "Whiskey, Vachon?"

"Bourbon," the younger vampire admitted sullenly. "What business is it of yours?"

He wrenched the glass away and drained it defiantly, turning back to the table.

"Interference," he pointed out. "Let me play the shot over."

The burly pair with pool cues shook their heads. "No way, man. Game goes as it goes. Ante up."

"Ah, hell." He half turned and nodded to the big-haired waitress who was waiting expectantly. "The same. My tab."

He watched narrowly as the bearded player carefully placed the cue ball.

"We need to talk," Nick said insistently. "Now, Vachon."

"You know, Knight," the Spaniard said conversationally, never taking his eyes off the table. "I am getting real tired of you thinking you can run my life."

"I saved it," Nick pointed out. "I think that counts for something."

Vachon turned back to him. His eyes were like holes burned in his head, dead black, with a spark of red fire barely hidden in their depths. "Yeah; but not enough."

Nick looked at him in concern. "When was the last time you slept?"

The other laughed harshly. "Hell, I almost slept forever, Knight. Kinda ruins your taste for it."

"When was the last time you were sober?"

Vachon took the fresh drink from the waitress and drank a third of it. "The night I buried Screed on the shore of Lake Ontario."

"Hey, Viejo," the second pool player broke in. "Your shot. One chance to take it, man, or you owe us a hundred bucks."

"Now, Vachon," Nick said softly, hand closing hard on the younger vampire's shoulder.

Vachon winced and sighed.

"Sorry, guys," he told the two. "Looks like I gotta go."

"Uh-uh, Juanito," the bearded man said. "You're in this game for serious, you play serious. You don't walk away from a hundred bucks on the table."

"I do and I am," Vachon answered.

"Better luck next time. At least you got a couple rounds of drinks out of me." He finished his drink, fished a few crumpled bills out of his pocket, threw them down, and turned to go.

The two blocked his way.

"Juanito, I don't think you understand," the second player told him, heavy hand on his chest. "You cut out, you owe us that hundred by forfeit."

Vachon looked down at the hand and drew a deep breath. When he looked up, his eyes were red-gold.

"Big mistake," he growled. He caught the hand, pushing up and back, bending to the breaking point, shoving the bigger man to the floor. Then he stepped in, licking his lips, ignoring Nick at his elbow and the shouting around them.

A pool cue snapped across his back, and he turned in rage, mouth twisting in a vicious grin as he left his first victim—as yet untouched—on his knees, cradling his wrist, and turned to the second.

He never got there. It was Nick who batted the bearded pool player away, then caught Vachon by his collar and ruthlessly dragged him out.

Vachon had run out of Spanish and was working through gutter French by the time Nick slapped him into a deserted doorway and stood in the entrance, arms folded and eyes blazing.

"Are you out of your mind?" the elder vampire demanded between clenched teeth.

"Lemme alone, Knight. I've managed five hundred years on my own without a babysitter and I don't need one now."

Nick forced his eyes back to blue, though the rage did not abate. "No, you need a leash! Vachon, I probably just saved your five-hundred-year-old butt—again."

Vachon looked down, recognizing the truth in that. He knew how quickly pool cues became weapons; deadly weapons to vampires. "Yeah, well, next time I'll play poker, okay?"

"No next time," Nick told him.

"Right, sure." He shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and leaned back against the wall. "Look, Knight, let me deal with this my own way, okay?"

Nick spread his hands. "I'd love to, Vachon. Believe me, chasing after you is not my idea of a fun evening. But while you're dealing with things 'your own way', my partner is trying to commit suicide."

The younger vampire straightened up, eyes wide.

"Tracy? Is she okay?" He caught Nick's coat in both hands. "Damn it, Knight! Is she all right?"

Nick shoved him back.

"She'll live, no thanks to you. Took a bullet in the arm in a drive-by." He held the other vampire's eyes. "Why didn't you tell her you were alive?"

Vachon looked down. "I don't know. I thought . . . maybe it was for the best if she thought I was dead. She could go on with her life, forget about me and vampires and all the weirdness; just . . ."

"Instead," Nick told him steadily, "she's been so distraught that I finally had to tell her myself that you were okay—and how it was that I knew. Which certainly doesn't lessen her danger, or get her away from our world."

The Spaniard shrugged. "So now she knows you're a vampire, huh?"

Nick nodded.

"Huh. Well, I think you should have told her a lo-ong time ago. Hell, you're her partner."

"Like you," the blond detective pointed out, "I was trying to protect her."

He chuckled reluctantly. "I've been told by Natalie that I'm a chauvinist. And Tracy wanted to kill me, by the way."

Vachon grinned. "Well, they're probably both right."

"She wanted to kill you, too. And I believe Natalie included you in the 'vampire chauvinist pig' category."

Another shrug. It was one of Vachon's favorite answers.

"Vachon, you need to talk to Tracy," Nick insisted. "She's going crazy not knowing how you're doing—and it's going to get her killed. I can't protect her everywhere, every minute. You know that."

Vachon sighed. Reluctantly, he looked up and met the older vampire's eyes. "Look, Knight, I . . . care a lot for Trace. Too much, maybe. But if I go back to her now . . . I can't go back and pretend nothing's happened, Knight! She sat with me when she thought I was dying! She brought me blood, after I nearly *killed* her when the hunger hit."

His eyes dropped. In a whisper, he added, "And when she kissed me . . . apricot and calla lilies . . . I thought it was the last thing I'd ever smell, and it was wonderful to think I'd have that with me when I died . . ."

The hands on his shoulders were gentle now.

"Vachon, I . . . I understand." Nick took a deep breath, aware of what he was saying. "If what happens between you . . . is without coercion, of her free will, then . . . it's between the two of you. I have . . . nothing to say about it."

He shook the black-haired vampire gently. "But you've got to talk to her, before she decides you don't care at all. Because I don't think she's going to feel much like living if she does."

Vachon simply looked at him, unable to think of anything to say.

Nick released him after a moment and stepped back.

"And *try* to stay out of trouble," he requested. Then he was gone.

After several long minutes of staring at nothing, Vachon followed him into the air.

❑❑❑❑❑

Joe Reese sat back in his chair, listening to his youngest detective with something akin to paternal pride. Tracy had shaken off her depression, it seemed, and was handling this briefing with the competence of an officer with twice her experience. Across the table from her, Nick was trying very hard to keep a grin off his face as Tracy explained patiently to Vanderveer and his team *exactly* how and where she needed them to be.

The lieutenant bristled.

"Look, Tracy, we'll handle all of that . . ." he began.

She made a chopping motion with one hand.

"You'll get me dead, too," she insisted. "Look, I am playing both ends against the middle here. I've got Marlena Hepburn on one hook and Jimmie Alexander Marcietto on the other, and neither of them knows it. I've got an entire black book of names . . ."

"Which are useless without evidence of the conspiracy," one of Vanderveer's men pointed out.

"Which Tracy is in the process of getting you," Nick shot back. "Isn't that the whole idea of this meeting?"

"Look, Knight, you may be the biggest maverick in Ontario, but that cuts no ice here."

"Enough with the cheap shots," Reese rumbled at last. "Let's get this set-up ironed out. I want Tracy as protected as possible; and that means that if she says your plan's gonna spook her contacts, then you just think of something else. This Marcietto's from New York; he don't give a damn about Crown procedure."

Eventually, they hammered out a plan which would both get Vice the evidence they needed, in a form the Crown prosecutor would accept, and keep Tracy and the other undercover officers as safe as possible.

Nick had lost his grin as the details got finer—he did not like the distance he was going to have to keep from his partner in this, and Reese couldn't blame him. Actually, though, he was glad to see it. The other thing that had vanished with Tracy's depression was the last of whatever wall had been keeping the two of them from being the tight partnership Reese knew they could be. Good. Nick hadn't really trusted anybody—except Natalie Lambert—since Schanke died. Nice to know he was finally, it seemed, coming out of it.

Tracy was going need a partner with no hesitations about backing her up—or letting her go.

❑❑❑❑❑

Walking back into the Raven was like coming home, oddly enough. Vachon paused in the shadows a few steps inside the door and took a deep breath, then resolutely squared his shoulders and ducked into the crowd. In only a few moments he was at the bar, raising a large goblet of Special Reserve to his lips.

Only a few weeks ago, he could have made that much blood last, oh, almost half an hour. Now it disappeared down his throat in an instant, and he had to close his eyes against the flare of hunger that turned them gold. Gritting his teeth, he set the empty goblet down with exaggerated care.

"Come with me, boy," LaCroix's silken voice whispered in his ear. A hand closed on the shoulder of his leather jacket, and pulled him effortlessly away.

Before Vachon could do more than snarl, he found himself in LaCroix's office in the back of the Raven. LaCroix released him, and he staggered back against the wall. "What the hell . . .?"

The master of the club looked at him with a surprising amount of sympathy.

"Your absence has been noted, Javier," he said, folding his arms.

Vachon noted absently that LaCroix was one of the few who called him by his first name—and pronounced it correctly. He straightened his jacket with a resentful jerk. "Oh, yeah? Miss me?"

"A certain spice has been lacking," the elder vampire admitted. "More importantly, The Raven's become quite a popular spot with certain members of the Toronto police force."

Vachon shrugged. "So?"

LaCroix measured him with pale eyes, then nodded.

"Stay," he ordered.

The Spaniard stayed. He was pretty sure that he was *not* happy to have come to LaCroix's notice. Not like this.

The tall man reappeared as silently as he had left, a glass in one hand and a bottle in the other. The bottle, still corked, he tossed to Vachon.

"Drink," he ordered.

Vachon needed no urging. The cork was out and the bottle half empty before he even realized it was pure blood, with no wine in it, just the slight tang of preservative. For a bare moment he was irked, then it faded to hunger and he kept drinking. Half of what was in his veins at the moment was probably bourbon anyway, and his body was heartily sick of it.

He lowered the bottle and opened his eyes to see that LaCroix had taken his seat behind the desk and was sipping his own drink, watching him with a lack of expression which made the younger vampire shiver.

"Now, then," LaCroix said conversationally, "Do you think you might be able to sit down, drink from a glass like a civilized being, and hold a decent conversation?"

Vachon shrugged and had to grin. "Don't know. I can try."

He took the seat indicated, pouring himself a glass from the waiting bottle. Deliberately, he took a sip, resisting the urge to simply toss it down. Hmm. Still pure blood. "What's the matter, don't I rate the good stuff anymore?"

LaCroix raised an eyebrow.

"It would seem to me you've had all the alcohol you could possibly desire, Javier." He raised his glass disdainfully. "Certainly you seem to have bathed in it."

"Yeah, well, if I'd known I was gonna come to your august notice, I would've taken a shower first." Vachon finished off the glass in two swallows and refilled it.

The elder vampire simply nodded, as if he wouldn't have expected anything else. Probably, he didn't, Vachon reflected ruefully.

"We'll let it pass for now," LaCroix continued, turning his goblet in his hands, watching the light glint off the fine crystal.

Vachon waited. No use sticking his foot any farther into his mouth. He sipped the blood, admitting to himself that Special Reserve would be no treat at this point. He'd been hunting the past few weeks, but not well. No one could abandon themselves to the hunt while looking over their shoulders for Enforcers, police detectives or God-knew-what.

Besides, whether his victims were dockworkers pulled into alleys, or one-night lovers, he kept hearing Screed's cheerful, mocking Cockney in his ears. He'd looked up too many times the past month, hoping against hope to see that hairless dome, and seeing only darkness.

He had to admit, he was really surprised he hadn't killed anybody. But even that seemed too much effort. Chose a victim, drink enough to keep himself going for a while, and move on. And on.

Why hadn't he simply left Toronto?

LaCroix seemed to answer his thoughts. "You seem to have left some business at loose ends, young Javier."

Vachon looked up sharply. "Oh, yeah? Like what?"

One pale eyebrow raised. "Are you being willfully obtuse, boy? Your little Detective Tracy Vetter, of course."

He felt his eyes flare gold. "Leave her alone, LaCroix."

LaCroix rolled his eyes and chuckled.

"I seem to hear *such* an echo whenever I mention her name. You and Nicholas, reading the same lines." He leaned back in his chair. "It's not me you have to worry about, you young fool. Your Tracy comes into the Raven almost every night, simply radiating the most enticing fatalism and despair. I'm surprised she's lived this long."

"Damn her," Vachon snapped. "I've told her to stay out of here. She *knows* how dangerous it is."

It was one thing for Nick to tell him such things, and another—a far more frightening other—for the master of the Raven to sit there with that idle interest on his death's-head face, rattling Tracy's fate in his hand like dice.

LaCroix nodded and raised his glass to his lips. “She also knows she can find you here—or at least, she could before your most recent, ah, absence.”

Vachon scowled. “So what do you want me to do? Tattoo a cross on her neck?”

“No,” the elder vampire answered slowly. He set his glass aside, and leaned forward, those pale eyes locking on Vachon’s dark ones. “But you might consider putting your *own* mark there.”

Vachon swallowed. “Huh?”

LaCroix cupped his chin in one hand, elbow on the desk.

“I have never seen a more poorly chosen vampire than your Urs,” he began quietly, as if discussing the weather. “If ever a mortal should have simply died, it is she. There is not even enough fire in her to go mad.”

He shook his head. “Nonetheless, I believe you’ve found something in Tracy Vetter that is . . . more enduring.”

He leaned back again, raising his glass to his lips. “From time to time we all have our mortal pets, young Javier. Even I am not immune to the lure. We play with them, and indulge them, and protect them—and eventually tire of them.

”But a few become more than pets. We find the minds, the souls, capable of reaching for eternity.“ His voice dropped into the Nightcrawler’s whisper. ”For those, and only those, are the ones who can stand at our sides, as our equals, through the centuries. They are the ones to whom we can wholeheartedly offer the gift of immortality.“

Vachon couldn’t suppress a shiver. He reached for his glass, drained it again, and refilled it. Then he had to take another swallow before he was sure his voice was steady enough to ask, ”Are you telling me to bring Tracy over? Knight’ll kill me.“

A thin smile curled the other vampire’s lips.

”Oh, that would never do.“ He chuckled. ”No, not over—not yet. But I know you, Javier; I’ve watched you.“

”Great. Time to move on.“

LaCroix raised a hand. ”Not so fast. I watch everyone. And I know what sort of control you have—quite impressive actually. You’ve been considered reckless in the community, I know. It seems you don’t deserve that reputation.“

Vachon shrugged.

”There’ve been times,“ he admitted.

”Could you take Tracy Vetter and not kill her?“

The Spaniard rocked back.

”Sure,“ he blurted out. ”No problem.“

LaCroix nodded.

”Nicholas doesn’t believe that, you know. Either for you—“ his voice and eyes dropped, as if he were talking to himself now, ”—or himself. I don’t believe he knows his own strength. Certainly he underestimates yours.“

Those bright, pale eyes fixed on the younger vampire again. ”Why haven’t you?“

Another shrug. ”Told you—Knight’ll kill me. He’s promised, and he’s enough older than me to make it stick.“

Light glinted off the crystal as LaCroix twirled his glass between two fingers. ”Well, then, let me counter his little order with a piece of advice you’d do well to consider.

“Nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine out of a thousand mortals are nothing more than prey. Whether they live or die is really immaterial. But that thousandth one is all too rare, too precious. Tracy Vetter *might* just be one of them. Take the time and find out. Do not let anyone else decide for you what you will do with her. Such a decision is too important to be in any other hands but your own.”

“I seem to see a contradiction here,” Vachon pointed out. “You’re *telling* me not to let anyone *tell* me what to do.”

LaCroix chuckled. “Yes. Amusing, isn’t it? Actually, what I’m telling you is, quite frankly, not to let Nicholas’ tiresome morality overcome your own instincts and feelings. Trust me on this.”

Vachon’s eyes narrowed. “Are you sure I’m not just being set up to be a pawn in your private war with Knight?”

“Perhaps. And perhaps I am simply having a . . . flash of altruism.”

“Oh, now, there’s an idea,” the younger vampire said sarcastically. He reached for his goblet and drank, thinking. Finally, he said, “Okay. What I read into this is that you’re basically telling me either one, that you’ll protect me against Knight if I need it; or two, you’ve noticed that he’s changed his tune and you want me to be grateful to you for bringing it to my notice.”

LaCroix applauded gently. “Very good, Vachon. Very good.”

Vachon stood.

“Well, fine. Maybe I am.” He paused, then added, “Thanks for making sure she didn’t get hurt while I wasn’t around, though.”

LaCroix inclined his head. “My pleasure.”

* * *

Tracy looked over at Nick as he put the Caddy into motion. He had managed to get her to agree to let him drive her to the meeting—at least, close to it. Truthfully, she hadn’t fought very hard. They’d hardly had five minutes together that wasn’t crammed with reports and stake-out details. Now, though, they had almost twenty minutes, with nothing but the low murmur of the radio.

He didn't look at all tense; just that faint smile, and the quick moving eyes—Nick on alert. She took a deep breath. "So, partner; let's talk."

He glanced over. "I was wondering how long it would take you. What do you want to know?"

"You mean, you're not going to make me drag it out of you drop by precious drop?"

Nick chuckled. "Trace, I've been working with you for a while, now. I know you don't quit. Why make things any harder than they have to be?"

"Is it so hard?" She thought about it. "I guess it would be."

He nodded, eyes on the street. "I don't exactly . . . talk a lot about myself."

"Yeah, I know." Another deep breath. "Okay. For starters, let me tell you that . . . I know a lot about Vachon . . ."

Another glance, this one rueful, stopped her. "Uh, maybe for starters, I ought to admit that I've been talking to Vachon as much as you have. More, actually."

She clenched her fists. "Ooh, I am going to kill both of you! Talking—about me, I presume?!"

"Well, yes," Nick admitted. "Among other things. Vachon's been quite helpful in keeping you from figuring out about me, you know."

Again a tumble of images, conversations. "Him and his 'gotta protect your partner' crap!"

"My fault, Trace. He did it because I asked him to. Told him, really."

She thought about that for a minute. "How'd you get him to listen to you?"

He shrugged. "Well, I'm older than he is. Stronger in a lot of ways."

"How much older?"

"I was born in 1195," he replied softly. "And was brought across in 1228."

That took some more thinking. "God, Nick! All the stuff you've *seen*!"

He had to chuckle at that.

"Oh, yeah, I've seen a lot. But you know, most of it you only realize is important or 'historical' when you look back at it. Like this—" he indicated the car, the assignment they were on. "—is it going to be footnote-in-the-history-books time, or just another job? We won't know 'til it's over—and maybe not even then."

"Wow." Tracy adjusted a lock of her "professional girl" hairstyle; much more elaborate than she usually bothered with, but part of the image she was to project tonight.

"So, uh . . ." This was not easy. It hadn't been easy with Vachon. It was even less easy with Nick. "So you're a . . . a vampire."

"That's right," he agreed calmly, as if she was simply stating his hair color.

"So why are you a cop?"

He braked for a traffic light. When they were at a full stop, he turned and looked at her.

"Tracy, I've done a lot of things I'm . . . not proud of. Things I hate to think about now. I've been as evil as you can imagine." He took a deep breath. "I've killed for blood, for pleasure, for convenience."

The light changed and he focussed on the road again. "So . . . now I'm trying to make up for it. To give back; to atone for what I've done."

"You're going to be a cop for eight hundred years?"

Nick laughed.

"I hadn't really thought of it," he admitted. "Actually, what I want to be is mortal."

"You mean, go back to being . . . human?"

He nodded. "I don't drink human blood anymore. I try not to drink blood at all."

"You'll starve to death!" she protested, remembering Screed and Vachon. "Nick, that's no way to make up for things!"

"We . . . I'm trying some . . . alternative methods . . ." he began.

She nodded. "You and Natalie, you mean. She's trying to cure you, isn't she?"

His turn to nod. "For the past four years," he admitted.

"Hmm." Tracy sat back in her seat, staring out the window without seeing. After several minutes she said, "What if you can't?"

"I'm not going to give up."

Another long silence.

"Okay. So let's see: my partner can fly, won't get hurt if he's shot at, can hypnotize people—except me and other resisters—and *really* shouldn't be out after sunrise. He doesn't take kindly to crosses and holy water, and blood—despite what you say," she pointed out acerbically "—is of *more* than academic interest."

She thought some more. "Jeez, Nick, you've been taking an awful lot of chances, haven't you?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes we have to. Trace, it's my version of standing up to a perp with a gun. That's all. Sometimes you have to do it, even though it might get you hurt. I've been around a long time. Even sunlight isn't immediately fatal—although I admit, it hurts like hell. As for the rest . . . I cope, like Nat says. I live with it."

She laughed.

"Okay. I guess I can, too." She glanced around as he pulled the car into the curb. "Just one thing, Nick."

He turned off the engine.

"Yeah?" he asked with some trepidation.

She faced him and poked a long-nailed finger into his chest.

"You don't keep me in the dark anymore, you hear? About *anything*. Vachon's told me about the Enforcers. I'm up to my as-yet-untouched neck in this already—don't think I don't know it. We're partners, right?" She waited until he nodded. "Then you keep me informed, *partner*."

He gave her a rueful smile. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good." She checked her watch, and sighed. "Well, I'd better get going."

"Trace—" He reached over to her as she swung the car door open and moved to step out. "I'll be backing you up the best way I know how. Count on it."

She nodded. "I am, partner. You better believe it."

"Scared?"

She took a deep breath and stood up beside the car. "Yeah. Some."

"Good. You can do it, Tracy. You're a damn good cop."

She rolled her eyes at the old joke. "Thanks, Nick!"

He grinned. "Go get 'em, Detective Vetter."

She nodded again, sharply, then straightened her shoulders and walked off.

❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑

Nick waited until she rounded the corner before getting out of the car himself. By the time he reached the sidewalk, Vachon was waiting for him.

Nick looked the younger vampire up and down. "You look better."

"Yeah. How's Tracy?"

"About to put the kibosh on an attempted Mob takeover." Vachon made an inarticulate noise of annoyance, and Nick relented. "She's a lot better. She can talk about you without choking up. Have you seen her yet?"

The Spaniard shook his head. "Not yet. Can I come along?"

Nick thought for a bare moment. "Yes. But stay out of sight—especially out of her sight. If she breaks cover on this one, it could be fatal. The Mob doesn't take kindly to being jacked around, especially not by female cops."

Vachon nodded.

"Yeah, I know." His eyes indicated upwards. "I'll take the high road, then."

"Good. And Vachon?"

Heavy eyebrows rose over dark eyes, questioningly.

"Thanks."

Brilliant white teeth flashed in a smile, then Vachon stuck his hands in his pockets and wandered off to find someplace less public from which to take to the air. Normally, he didn't bother, since almost no one believed they'd actually seen a man disappear in front of them. But he figured that, if Knight was being so nice, he'd be nice back. This time.

❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑

For once, it worked like clockwork. They had pulled in Marlena Hepburn three days earlier, using information gathered by Tracy and their other agents, and promised her immunity in exchange for cooperation. A businesswoman to the core, she had agreed. She had disavowed all links to the drug community, either actually uninvolved or simply giving them up to save her more legitimate business ventures. With her cooperation, they had rigged her office with cameras and recording devices. Marcietto and his people had been there before and checked the place out. They added nothing new, not so much as a vase of flowers, but carefully bugged what was already there. Then they briefed Marlena on her role, and set up Tracy's meeting with Marcietto.

Nick watched in astonishment, listening with his heightened hearing to the surveillance team's wire. Tracy came in, brash and cold, the professional girl on her way up. She stated her position; Marcietto countered. She laid out terms, and they wrangled over "dues" and "positions" and "oversight". She drew information out of them like she'd hypnotized them, using her wits and her body and her big eyes as if they were the only weapons she'd ever had to rely on.

Almost before he realized it, she'd given the code phrase, and half a precinct worth of officers suddenly converged on the office. Not a shot was fired. The only injury was Alfonso, who had tried to pull his gun. Tracy had taken a fiendish delight in kicking it out of his hand and slamming him to the floor. She had one high heel planted over a kidney, the other on his wrist as she held him on the floor until a uniformed officer came over to drag him up. It turned out she'd broken his wrist and hand when she kicked him. Perkily unrepentant, she pushed a lock of hair away from her face and grinned brightly. "Sorry bout that."

Finally, Nick could get to her. "Tracy, you were great!"

She flung her arms around his neck. "Oh, Nick, it was flawless!"

He rocked back in surprise, then hugged her back before disentangling himself.

"Lt. Vanderveer wants to debrief you right away," he told her. "Don't let him growl at you. He just told me he'd never seen a cleaner sting. No one's going to be able to yell 'entrapment' on this one."

Her smile was blinding. "Darn right. Wait for me?"

"Count on it."

❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑

Everything seemed quiet and shadowy when Tracy emerged from the office, some forty-five minutes later. Cops and crooks had both disappeared, except for the small crew busily de-bugging the place.

"Your partner is downstairs by his car," Vanderveer told her. "Thanks, Vetter. We'll be in touch."

"Right, Lieutenant," she agreed. The adrenalin high had just about worn off; she was tired, her feet hurt, and she was hungry. Maybe she could persuade Nick to stop for something to eat before they went back to the station.

There were two figures leaning on the Caddy's gleaming hood. One was Nick, his hair gold in the streetlight. The other was shorter, darker. They both straightened as she stepped out of the doorway. Nick moved away, leaving the other figure alone in a halo of lamplight.

Tracy slowed, then stopped.

"Vachon?" she whispered. "Javier?"

He gave her that heart-stopping, quizzical look, head slightly cocked and eyes wide. Then, without a word, he opened his arms. No defenses. No words.

Her choice.

She stumbled, half-falling, half-throwing herself into his arms, feeling them close around her like bands of steel. Her fingers ran over his face as if she were blind, stroking through the tangled black silk of his hair.

"You're alive, you're alive," she whispered. "Oh, God, Javier, I thought I'd *lost* you."

No words. One hand reached up to cradle her head, and his mouth met hers, silencing all the doubts, all the fears.

❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑

Nick watched them. He felt the hunger flare up in the younger vampire, felt him push it away with so little effort that it was obviously automatic. That was interesting, and caused the elder vampire's eyes to narrow speculatively.

Tracy was crying now, and Vachon let her, stroking her golden hair, still silent, his other arm locked around her as if he'd never let her go. Then the Spaniard looked up and saw him watching. Eyebrows rose and one corner of his mouth quirked up. He bent his head to Tracy's and murmured, "Hey, Trace, you're embarrassing your partner here."

That made her laugh and straighten up. She reached up to wipe her cheeks, but Vachon's hand got there first, brushing one finger across her face in a caress.

"*Cara*," he whispered.

She blushed, then resolutely turned. "Nick . . ."

He grinned. "Why don't I go back to the station and keep Reese from dropping dead of suspense?" he suggested. "Vachon can see you home."

Another blush.

"All right," she agreed weakly.

Vachon looked at her with that thoughtful, curious look of his. She met his dark eyes with her own blue ones, and the intensity caused him to rock back slightly, even while that shadowy smile curled the corners of his lips.

She smiled back.

"Better get me tomorrow off, Nick," she told her partner. No blush this time. Just calm surety. "I don't think I'm going to feel like coming in."

❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑

They stood in her apartment, in the middle of the floor, suddenly awkward. He'd flown her here in silence, enjoying her enjoyment of the experience. Now, feet safe on the ground again, in the familiarity of her own place, Vachon waited for the Vetter Common Sense to reassert itself. Hoping it would. Hoping it wouldn't.

Tracy looked at him for a moment, then stepped back and kicked off her shoes.

"That's a start," she said decisively.

"Trace," he started.

"Vachon," she said at the same time.

They looked at each other, then gave up and laughed.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just . . ."

"I know."

She reached out and touched a hand to his cheek. His eyes closed and he drew a deep breath, reveling in the warmth, the scent of her. He reached up, and covered her hand with his own.

"Trace." He opened his eyes again, and met hers seriously. "I never wanted to hurt you."

Tracy nodded. "I figured that out. Nick . . . Nick told me. I'm . . . I'm sorry about Screed, Vachon."

"Me, too." He turned his head, brushed his lips against her wrist. Her pulse speeded up, and a jolt of desire went through her, like electricity.

"I want you," she told him. "And I don't care what happens."

Vachon looked back up ruefully. "I ought to remind you how many times I've almost killed you, but somehow I don't think you'll listen."

She shook her head and stepped closer.

"Nope. Too many almosts. Not killing me has gotten to be a habit with you. I don't think you'll break it now." She drew his hand down, towards her waist, pulling his arms around her. "I'm not going to let you run away this time, Vachon."

A faint smile quirked his mouth. "You called me 'Javier' earlier. You even got the pronunciation right."

"Javier." Her voice was just above a whisper, a caress of sound.

Warm lips on his cold ones, demanding and giving all at once. Tracy's warm body pressed up against his, nipples hardening, hips pushing in against his own hardness, warm hands sliding up his back to tangle in his hair. The smell of fruit, wrapping around him like a fog. Her heart pounding, pulling his own into a faster rhythm, drawing his fangs down and brightening his eyes into gold.

Vachon let it come this time, but held it on an iron leash. LaCroix had been right; he had the control not to kill. He'd always had it, even during the times when he simply shrugged and didn't bother to use it. He would not be a slave to anyone or anything, and certainly not to a damned appetite.

She felt the change in him, and a shiver ran through her body. But she didn't stop kissing him, even though the fangs made her wary. It was he who pulled back.

"Don't you dare," she whispered, hands tightening on his back.

The growl in his voice was more of a purr.

"Not this time," Vachon agreed. "But . . . how about more comfortable surroundings? And—" his hands plucked at the jacket and high-necked blouse she still wore "—fewer things in the way?"

Tracy laughed, then looked at him seriously. "You're really okay? I mean . . ."

He closed his eyes for a moment, pushing the desire away, then looked up again. "I'm fine. Does it scare you, Tracy?"

"I don't know. I guess. But . . . it excites me, too." The last was a whisper, as if she were afraid of it. Her eyes dropped.

He caught her chin with a finger, pulling her face up to meet his gaze. Soundlessly, he mouthed, "Good." Then he grinned at her.

She laughed back.

"You're right you know," she told him abruptly. "I do want to get out of this outfit."

"Let me help," he suggested.

She naturally protested, even as he peeled off the jacket, threatening to rip it when it caught at her shoulder. She fought him, of course, and tried to snatch it away as he balled it up and looked for a suitably obscure corner to throw it.

"Vachon, that's my second best suit you're ruining!"

"That means you still have one. Fine." He threw the jacket into her bedroom, and naturally, she followed it.

She turned away from him and bent down to pick the crumpled jacket up, which gave him easy access to the button and zipper on the back of her skirt. It fell to her feet as she straightened, and she squeaked and tried to turn, tangling her ankles.

Vachon caught her, lifted her effortlessly out of the skirt, and kicked it out of the way. The jacket was removed from her hands and joined it. He set her back down.

"That's better." He pulled her close for another kiss, sliding his hands up the silk of her blouse, enjoying the warmth and the feel of it under his hands. His fingers encountered her bra strap, and he undid it effortlessly, then continued moving his hands up to rub her shoulders and press her against him.

Tracy murmured something into his mouth, then pulled away. "Hey!"

"What?" He slid his hands back to her waist, tugging the shirt out of her slip so he could reach underneath.

She shivered a little.

"Not fair," she protested, trying to step back.

He let her, eyebrows rising quizzically. "What's not fair, Trace?"

He trailed the fingers of one hand across her stomach.

That wide grin lit her face; she wasn't ticklish. "You're pulling me out of my clothes in record time, Vachon, without letting me have equal access."

"You're right," he agreed, hands moving up her sides, nudging her arms up so he removed blouse and bra in one motion. "There."

He started to lean in.

She crossed her arms over her breasts. "Your turn."

"Plenty of time for that," Vachon protested, trying to take her hands.

She avoided his hands, reaching for his shirt. "Now. I don't want any cloth between us."

Well, when she put it that way. . . . He grinned and let her remove the shirt, then drew her in again. He threw his head back, breath hissing in raggedly. "*Dios*, you feel so good!"

She pressed up against him, warm hands massaging down his back, soft breasts against his chest, lips just touching the side of his neck.

"So do you," she whispered back.

"My skin's cold."

She snuggled closer. "You feel *wonderful*, Javier."

He buried his nose in her hair. "You smell wonderful."

Independently, his hands skimmed down her sides, catching now on the clothing at her waist. Vachon moved back a bare half-step, then knelt, skimming slip, nylons, and panties to her ankles. She stepped out of them, one hand touching his shoulder for balance. He looked up, and held her eyes with his own. Her hand moved to his hair, stroking it. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, then he leaned in again, pressing a kiss just above her curls.

Tracy shivered. "Javier . . ."

He looked up again. "I want to know you, *cara*, every way possible. I want to please you every way I can." His hands slid up to her hips.

Her eyes were so blue, so big, so solemn.

"I want you so much," Tracy whispered. "It makes me afraid. Is this me, or something you do to me?"

He rose again, taking her into his arms.

"It's you," he told her, "because you do it to me, too."

She laughed at that, unexpectedly.

"Then we do it to each other." Her mouth met his, fiercely, lips open, tongue exploring.

Vachon met her explorations with his own, tried to keep her away from his fangs and failed, then shivered as she careful stroked across them. A low, growling purr started in the back of his throat. He tried to suppress it, afraid of frightening her.

Then she growled back at him, and he broke the kiss in surprise. She laughed again, a low, sensuous sound. "I love when you do that."

"You . . . you do?"

"Mmmhm." Tracy's lips wandered along his jaw to his ear. Teeth closed on his earlobe. "First time I heard you do that, scared as I was, it sent a jolt through me."

What she was doing to him was pretty jolting, too. He pulled back, gently.

"*Querida*, let me get rid of a few encumbrances." With more haste than grace, he skinned out of jeans and shoes and kicked them aside.

She was looking at him, unembarrassed—as a matter of fact, she looked pretty pleased. He looked back, hands spread slightly to his sides, as if to say, "well, here it is". He wondered what she saw, and what she thought of what she saw.

For his part, he was dizzy with the sight and smell of her. Her skin was softly tinted with human warmth, her breasts not large but deliciously shaped. Her curls were, if anything, slightly paler than her hair, and shone with the faintest gleam of moisture.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered.

"So are you," she replied. "That's the only word for it. Beautiful."

Vachon laughed soundlessly, eyebrows up at that. He'd been called a lot of things in his life, but he'd really have to dig to find that one again. Enough standing around, he decided. Too much of this was going to make him crazy. He held out one hand to her. "Trace."

Her glance at the bed told him that they were still on exactly the same wavelength. She put her hand in his, let him lead her over to it and flip the covers aside. He pushed her gently down, then laid her back, leaning over her to kiss her again. She tried to pull him down on top of her, but he resisted, moving his mouth from hers to wander down her body. He paused at her breasts, soft and warm and sweet. His tongue tip flickered across one nipple, while he played with the other between two fingers. Her hands came up to meet his, stroking and urging him on, a low murmur of pleasure rewarding his efforts.

He took her breast into his mouth, teasing it with tongue and the barest touch of teeth. Careful not to cut her, both for her comfort and his own. Feeling her pulse against his tongue, his lips, loud in his ears, echoing in his gut like an overdriven bass. Tracy shivered, and pushed up against him.

He moved lower now, down her smooth stomach, kisses and gentle nips, fingers gliding now ahead, now behind, building pleasure on pleasure. Her fingers were in his hair now, tracing along his ears as he knelt at the side of the bed, and gently pushed her thighs further apart.

The scent of fruit and flowers was overwhelming. He leaned in, pressing a kiss to these lips, too, tongue reaching in to explore. He found her clitoris easily, and felt the shudders rack her at his first, tentative touch. He started to pull back, just a bit, but her hands pushed him down instead, urging him on. Fingers joined the exploration, and her legs drew farther apart to grant him access.

"Oh, God, yes," she whispered.

Her pulse thundered in his ears, the wash of her blood like waves crashing onto the shore. A turn of his head, and the artery was his, but Vachon refused to make that move, reaching instead for this other taste of her, sweet, hot, a hint of spice behind the sweetness. He delved deeper with tongue and fingers, eyes closed, totally concentrating on taste and feel. She braced one foot against his shoulder, pushing closer. Her muscles closed around his fingers spasmodically, a promise of delights yet to come. And from somewhere far away, her voice encouraged him on, breathless and inarticulate, then shrieking as the climax overtook her.

He drew back, gently, with little touches of lips and tongue and fingers that struck sparks along her nerves and caused her breath to catch. He rested his cheek against her thigh and looked up at her. A sheen of perspiration made her skin glow. Her hands dropped away from her own breasts self-consciously, and an extra touch of rose lit her cheeks.

"Taste of apricots," he whispered, somewhat out of breath himself.

She smiled. "You said that once before—that I smelled like fruit."

He pulled himself up to lie beside her on the bed. "You do. Fruit and flowers. Springtime. Just a hint of spice in there, too." He drew her close, running his hands down her back and pressing his lips to her throat. "So good."

Her head tipped back. "Javier . . ."

Vachon ran the tip of his tongue down along the big vein there, his purr rumbling softly in the back of his throat again. Blood, yes. He wanted it, was driving himself stark crazy wanting it, and Tracy was offering it to him. But the part of him that was still stubbornly human, with human needs, was driving him, too.

He rolled onto his back, pulling her with him despite her yelp of surprise, rubbing his erection through her curls, feeling her slickness and the heat of her. She steadied herself by bracing her hands on his shoulders and settling her knees, but instead of rising up, she simply pushed against him, labia caressing his scrotum, and fingers pressing his length along her stomach. He groaned, watching her.

"Even this part of you is cool," she noted softly, cupping her hand around his shaft.

He had to swallow before he could answer, and couldn't keep the roughness out of his voice. "You are my heat, Trace. Flame to my moth."

Vachon shuddered as her hand tightened, sliding up and down slowly, taking her own moisture on her fingers and rubbing it along him. "*Cara, por favor* . . ."

A sensuous smile curled her lips, then Tracy shifted, rising up over him and sinking down slowly, hips rocking in timeless rhythm, sheathing him in the heart of her fire. He shuddered again, and thrust up, hard, as she gasped, "Oh, God!"

He wanted to stay under her, draw out the pleasure and the anticipation as long as possible, but the vampire part of him had other plans. He twisted again and she was under him, legs wrapped around him, hands on his arms as he braced himself over her. He thrust hard, and was afraid suddenly that he'd hurt her, as her eyes closed and hands clenched.

"Trace?" he gasped, holding still with an effort.

"Don't stop!" she breathed. "You feel *so* good! Don't stop, Javier; take me!"

Nothing human or vampire could have resisted that invitation. He drew almost all the way out of her, then plunged deep, again and again, hard and fast. Her eyes were closed, teeth clenched, fingernails dug into his arms, hips rising up to meet his every bit as ferociously.

Then she was dragging him down, gasping, "Now . . .! *Now!*"

Her head pushed back into the pillows, arching her neck up.

His lips drew back from his teeth, and with a snarl he buried them into flesh. Blood filled his mouth, hot and sweet, spiced with orgasm as she shuddered beneath him. Ecstasy. Nothing in his life had ever tasted so good, sent such a crackle of sensation through him. He pressed down harder, opening the punctures a little more, swallowing quickly, unwilling to lose a single precious drop. *Madre de Dios*, this was heaven!

From far away, her voice whispered, "If you kill me, I'll never let you make love to me again . . ."

It was so terribly Tracy that it cut through the red haze of feeding, the shudders of pleasure still rocking both of them. Vachon pulled up from her with a laugh, not worried that his eyes were still gold, or his lips stained with her blood.

"I believe you would, too," he answered breathlessly. "But I'm not about to kill you."

He bent back to her throat, licking the trickle of blood away. "Drop by precious drop, elixir of ecstasy." He teased the wounds a little wider with his fangs, sucked the blood up, swallowing the scant mouthful reverently. "Do you feel it, Trace? Beyond any mortal pleasure . . ."

One hand came up to cradle the back of his head, fingers tangling in his hair.

"I do," she agreed. They were both whispering, as if talking out loud would somehow break the spell. "And I want to have it again, and again. I could let you kill me like this . . . it would feel so good . . . but I don't want to die."

"I don't want you to die," he said softly. He licked another trickle of blood away. It would stop now, the punctures almost sealed already, if he would just leave them alone. "I want you to live forever. I want to have you forever."

She laughed. "I don't think I'm ready for that quite yet, Javier."

He was willing to let that go, for now, cleaning the last few drops of blood from her skin. The punctures were closed now, two neat, small holes that would heal without scarring.

"You taste so good," he sighed, pulling back at last and rolling onto his side, pillowing her head on his arm.

"Do I?" Her eyes were closed, she snuggled up against his chest. "I'm glad."

His turn to laugh. "You amaze me, Tracy Vetter."

Those big eyes opened and blinked. "I do? Why?"

"It's getting to be a bit of a list," he confessed, drowsily content.

"Mmm." She reached down for the duvet and pulled it over them, then curled back up in his arms. "Well, I don't have any place I've got to be . . ."

end

Somewhere in the Night

by

Roger Armstrong
(Aka Le Phantom)

[This story takes place after "Fever" and deviates from the established storyline.]

On the day I walked away
All the blue rolled into grey
Now in the dark, alone I lay
Should have stopped
But I could never, ever stay

I don't think I'll ever understand why I run. I guess I've been doing it for so long it's become a habit. With the Inca finally gone, I had to find someone else to run from. But why did it have to be Tracy Vetter?

It was after I recovered from the fever. The whole thing, watching Screed die, watching myself get weaker and weaker—it made me feel something I hadn't felt in nearly 500 years: my mortality. And Tracy was right there with me, watching it happen and not being able to stop it.

After I buried Screed, I left. I just left. I didn't take anything from the church, didn't bother to tie up loose ends; I just left. And in doing so, I left behind my beautiful Tracy.

I know she was never really "my" Tracy, but I gradually began to see her as such. *After* I left. After it was too later.

Somewhere in the night
Inside my dreams you burn so bright
And I'm with you there and everything's all right
Somewhere in the night
Before the darkness turns to light
Let me love you there
Somewhere in the night

The dreams started exactly two weeks after I left. I see her standing on a hill, her arms widely outstretched.

"Come to me," I hear her say. As I close the gap between us, I see that she is more beautiful than I had ever seen her. I take her into my arms and hold her close to me.

"Tracy, I . . ." I start to say, but before I can say "love you," her body bursts into flames hotter than the sun. I always wake up as I feel my clothes begin to burn.

Second chances I won't get
Wouldn't dare to hope, and yet
Everywhere I turn I see your silhouette
Been so long
But I never will forget

I've never felt this way about a mortal before, and that scares the hell out of me. I have faced and slain countless men with swords, spears, and guns, and one little, naive, mortal girl scares me to death.

Death. Tracy thinks I'm dead. I know this, but why do I still expect her to be looking for me? Why is it that every young blonde woman I see has her face? Why do I hear her calling to me from every shadow? And why can I never get away?

Somewhere in the night
Inside my dreams you burn so bright
And I'm with you there and everything's all right
Somewhere in the night
Before the darkness turns to light
Let me see your face
Feel your warm embrace
Let me love you . . .
Somewhere in the night

Tracy, I love you. Tracy, I hate you. Tracy, I need you. Tracy, be my Tracy, just for a century or so. I'm not dead, Tracy. At least, not any more than before. I'm not dead. But I'm scared, Trace. And I'm alone.

But you'll never know. Live your mortal life. Play your mortal games. Die your mortal death. And maybe every so often, remember me. Because, in the end, you're the only one who will.

end

Song lyrics are from "Somewhere in the Night" on the Quantum Leap Soundtrack.

"Ashes to Ashes": The Car Scene

by Bonnie Purdoe

[The spoken dialogue in this scene is verbatim from the episode "Ashes to Ashes". The thoughts and motivations have been added for your entertainment.]

Tracy made her way downstairs. She wondered if she had done the right thing by calling him, especially after what had happened last week. She felt bad about it. But, who else was she going to call? Vachon was the only one who might be able to tell her something about LaCroix.

She exited the Precinct into the back parking lot. Thankfully, there did not seem to be anyone else around. She immediately saw Vachon leaning casually against the front fender of her car, concentrating on the coin he kept tossing and catching. *Why am I so nervous about seeing him again?* She took a slow, deep breath.

"Thanks for coming by on such short notice," she announced her arrival, as if he had not heard her boots crunching through the ice on the ground.

Short notice? Overdue is more like it. "You forget, time is relative," he very offhandedly replied. She had left so suddenly that night, with only a quick, "I gotta go. I'll call you later, okay?" She never had called, well, until tonight. If he lived another 500 years, he doubted he would ever understand women!

Time is relative? What the hell did he mean by that? She sighed silently. *Just stick to business, Tracy.* "The guy who owns the Raven, LaCroix . . . "

"Uh-huh." *Uh-oh! Don't go there, Trace. You don't want to know* anything *about LaCroix.*

"We got a tip about a murder there. All we found was LaCroix and a victim whose head had been severed from its body. We're holding LaCroix as a material witness."

Tracy turned as she heard the door to the Precinct open. When she turned back, Vachon was gone.

Dammit, Vachon! She sighed in resignation. *Why do I bother?*

Before heading back upstairs, she glanced around one last time, and caught the glint of something on the ground at her feet. She bent down and picked up a coin—the coin Vachon had been, only moments before, intently flipping. It was a Loony, a one-dollar piece, and he had just dropped it without a second thought before taking off.

Well, no one could ever say Vachon is

materialistic! Tracy shook her head slightly.

She started when she heard a sharp double-tap on the car window behind her. It was Vachon, inside her car. *How does he always manage to get past locked doors anyway?*

Vachon flashed a quick smile at her as he beckoned her inside. He thought that the extreme temperature must certainly be bothering her. "It's warmer in here." *And private.*

Tracy climbed into her car and shut the door. Without thinking, she blurted, "Is LaCroix one of you?" *Oh, God, do I really want to know the answer to that?*

How did I know she was going to ask me that? What can I tell you, Trace? LaCroix will have my head if I tell you the truth. So lie, Vachon, it won't be the first time. Oh, but I hate to lie to her. How important is it that she know? LaCroix certainly wouldn't have left a body lying around if he did murder someone. He can't possibly be the one. Besides, Nick knows. Sorry, Trace. "No."

"Well, there was something there. It was a presence. It felt evil." *Yeah, evil. I'm sure of it. The captain felt it, too.* "If it wasn't LaCroix, then what was it?"

Great, Jav, now what do you tell her? "Tracy, it's natural to get a little rattled by severed heads." *Oops, she won't like that one.*

Tracy rolled her eyes at Vachon. *Why does he do that?* "Don't run me around here, Vachon. You know what I mean. Evil's a part of you." *I saw it that night last week at the church. His eyes had gone that feral yellow after he kissed me. I should have been frightened that a simple kiss would do that to him, but I wasn't. Oh, God, how I wanted him at that moment. Yeah, and that's what terrified me! What am I gonna do? How can I have a relationship with a vampire and stay alive?* "Maybe that's why we'd never work."

Vachon was stunned. *What was she talking about? Last week? That kiss? And what a kiss it had been! It was the first time she hadn't been the one to pull away. The first time she gave as good as she got. Oh, the adrenaline rush adding spice to her sweet blood, the quick pounding of her heart, the desire plain in her eyes. And now she says I'm evil? Like that makes* any *sense?* "What?"

"It's in you. I can feel it, and it scares me." *It scares me that it makes me want you even more.* The memory of his lips on hers flashed through her mind; followed by the image of those eyes. The eyes of a predator—wild, dangerous, unpredictable. *Alert, intelligent, powerful.* She felt a complete honesty from him when he was like that; no veiled emotions, no hidden thoughts. Not like those fathomless brown eyes he usually wore, the eyes that hid all from her. *Like a forest to get lost in.*

It scares her? I scare her? No. That wasn't fear I saw the other night. "What's that got to do with what happened at the Raven?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me." *Why did I say that to him? How could I have told him he was evil? You are screwing this up so badly, girl.*

Tell you? Tell you how much I care about you? How much I wish I could show you how deeply I care? How much I want to hold you, kiss you, be with you as only mortals can? He reached over and stroked her chin with his thumb in the most tender, intimate of ways. *I'm so sorry if I hurt you, if I scared you, if I wanted more than you could give.* A small, sweet smile graced his lips. "Sorry."

Bewildered by the reason for his touch, Tracy's hand instinctively closed over his. She almost pulled away. "Will you do me a favor?"

"Sure, anything." He smiled so tenderly at her.

I fling that accusation at him, throw up that wall, and this is how he responds: with a smile, saying he'll do anything. God! Why am I doing this to myself? Why am I doing this to him? Well, what are you going to ask him? Huh? Never to touch you again? Because you're afraid? Afraid that you'll give in to what you're really feeling for this guy? Afraid that you'll get yourself in too deep? Well, go on then. Tell him never to stroke your hair, never to caress your chin, never to kiss you. Tell him that you don't want to want him as badly as you do, because you don't know if you are strong enough to give him everything he really wants. Go on. ". . . Uh, give me a call when you get home." *Chicken!*

He knew that couldn't possibly be the favor. *Will I ever figure out what runs through that pretty, little head of yours, Tracy Vetter? Well? One last chance to say something, querida. Nope? All right, then, maybe next time.* He got out of the car, waved, "See ya later," then walked over to a patch of shadow before taking to the air.

end

Vachon

by

Jamie Melody Randell

I like him.

No, really. Even though he's the original mortal wanna-be—just like the girls and women who liked to follow me around during my pseudo-lives in the music business; the guys who elbowed each other out of the way to be my best buddy. Sycophants, all of 'em, so desperate to be part of the "in crowd" that they'd do damn near anything. . . . Nick's the same way, when it comes to humanity; and just like the groupies, watching him at work is amusing and more than a little pathetic.

Like most of the really old ones, he surrounds himself with a comfortable cushion of false humanity: luxury, wherever and whenever possible, opulence residing carefully within a veneer of Everyman. I mean, one look at his digs—the loft looks sparse, but all the furniture is expensive and new, and there are treasures everywhere. So on the few occasions he's deigned to look me up on my own home ground, of course I can see the scorn in his eyes, carefully veiled (because he is nothing if not polite) but there nonetheless.

Still . . . I like him.

He's got this whole Mr. Responsibility thing going—responsible cop, responsible vampire—never mind the inherent contradiction between the two, and never mind the fact that his own life is about as screwed up as you can get. . . . He lectures me about facing up to responsibility, and I'm not sure he's really got the faintest clue what the word means. To me, responsibility means facing up to the world around me—who I am, what I am, what I want and where I'm going. Even with the Inca after me . . . I never abandoned a friend in trouble, I never let my private battles get in the way of my crowd—my family. Somehow, I don't think Nick could make the same claim.

And yet, I still like him.

Maybe part of it is the whole Tracy thing. Generally, we don't let ourselves get close to mortals, not unless we're courting a mate or a child or a meal. That's standard wisdom, as basic as "Look both ways before crossing the street". And to continue the metaphor, nobody's gonna sympathize when you break the rule: hey, if you're not smart enough to look both ways before crossing. . . .

But when I look at Tracy, when I'm close to her, the things that I feel . . . and I know Nick understands. Whatever other differences separate us, I know he understands *that feeling* perfectly well.

And I know he likes me. In his own superior, distant way—after all, to him I'm a youngster, and never mind that on his cow-blood diet I could probably flip him through his own skylight if I tried—Nick likes me. It isn't often that the oldsters "stoop so low" as to recognize those of us who haven't completed our first half-millennia . . . even the General only deigns to notice me because Nick does.

Yeah, the General, that's what they call him, at least to his face. There are other names, but nobody with an ounce of common sense dares even *think* those terms within a five-mile radius of the Raven. You want to talk old, now *that's* old. None of us would dream of crossing him, but Nick does it with regularity, and walks away relatively unscathed.

Nick occupies a funny spot in our society: he's old, and he's one of the General's kids, and that makes him formidable, and at least nominally respected—but in every other way, he's a laughingstock. Cow blood? A cop—and an honest one at that? Searching for humanity? Get real.

And yet, I like him. Even though the others taunt me for the company I keep. I'm just glad that they don't know about Tracy—only a few of my closest allies know about her. . . .

Screed. Never thought I could miss anyone so much.

I sought out Nick after that, because I knew he'd understand that, too—what it was like to lose a friend, one of your children—and we got drunk on a couple bottles of the Raven's best stock, sat around and watched a hockey game, didn't say two words to each other except to talk about the score—and by the time I left, I felt much better.

But now there's this empty space in my world—and I keep looking at Tracy, and thinking about filling that gap, and that's something I *know* I can't talk to him about.

To Nick, our "condition" is equivalent to damnation. And I can sort of understand how he might feel that way, because there have been times I've longed to walk in the sun beside some special someone . . . My solution, the usual solution, is to bring the someone into the darkness. But Nick can't do that—doesn't believe in that—and the very notion that I might be considering it, well, that's a confrontation I'd rather avoid.

And yet he "assigns" me to look after Tracy, just the same way he's assumed responsibility for his mortal doctor friend. I guess he thinks everyone is as intent on self-flagellation as he is. Given my choice, knowing how Nick feels about vampire reproduction and the probable penalty he'll exact if I give in to temptation, I would gladly have left Toronto behind for at least the next few decades. Out of sight, out of mind. . . . Or at least, out of danger. Safer for Tracy, if retaining her humanity is part of her long-term game plan. . . .

I haven't found the courage to broach that topic with her yet. I think I'm afraid of what she might say. Recoiling from me in horror, that I can stand; it's happened before, not often enough to bruise my ego, but with sufficient frequency that I've learned how to cope. But what if she says she wants it?

Man, Nick would have my head on a platter. Never mind that I'm not his child and neither is Tracy and that makes it none of his damn business. He would work me over something awful, and the General would make sure nobody interfered with "his Nicholas", and I would be toast: as simple as that.

And despite all that . . . I like him. Don't know why. But I like him.

Stopped by his place the other night, mostly because I was between dividend checks and running low on cash, and in need of a drink, and I didn't want to have to ask the General for credit. He'd do it, 'cause if we have one ironclad rule, it's that you don't let your brethren go hungry—but I didn't want to deal with the aura of contempt he'd project. And for all his moral posturing, cow wasn't the only type of blood in Nick's fridge. He didn't like to talk about it, but any vampire can see the "fresh-blood" flush and know what you've been eating.

Nick was a little annoyed, I think because I hadn't bothered to call first (another one of those human rituals he puts such stock in. I mean, come on, vampires do not call each other before they visit) but he waved me toward his fridge and kept on playing his piano.

Always the same thing, classical stuff, and usually mournful; and I just had to ask him, "Don't you ever play anything upbeat?"

And he grinned up at me, and broke into the wildest rendition of "Johnny B. Goode" I'd ever heard. . . . I ended up going home for my guitar, and the two of us jammed for something like six hours, and it was great, more fun than I'd had since my last band broke up.

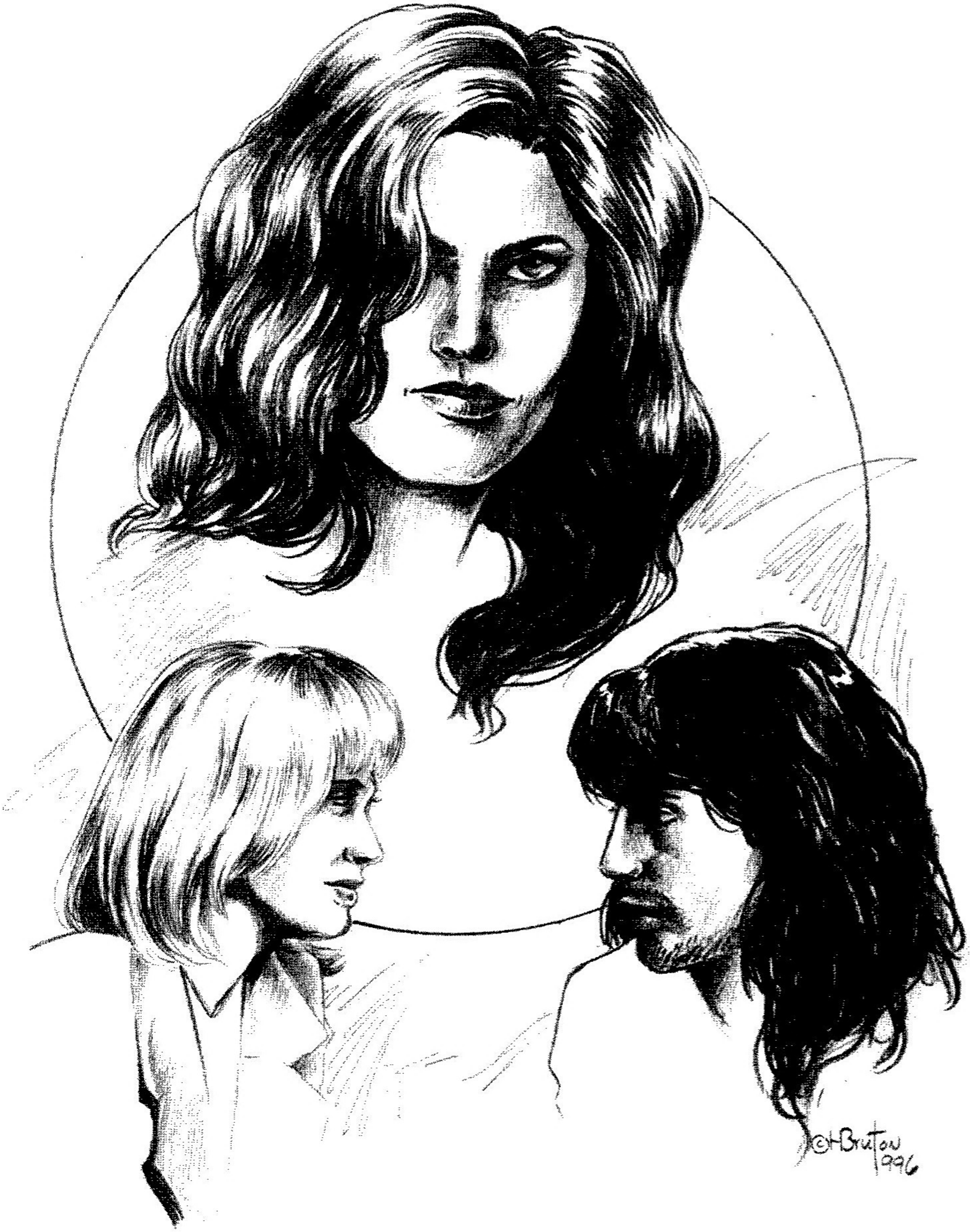
Like I said, I like him.

He has the same contempt for my chosen lifestyle that any yuppie professional would have for your typical slacker—never mind that my choice to be what I am was made with a lot more freedom and a lot less anguish than his own—and heaven forbid I should light up a cigarette in his spotless apartment. His nose wrinkles, and he looks at me with the kind of accusing look that a mortal gets just before they tell you that you're courting lung cancer. He's keeping me tied to this place, to that woman, yet stands in the way of my ever getting what I truly want from her. He's possibly the biggest hypocrite I've ever met, so much the worse because he's wholly blind to the depth of his own self-delusion . . . and he thinks *I'm* irresponsible and immature.

But I like him.

Man, I need a drink.

end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Protect and Serve

by Christina Kamnikar

1

All of us, at one time or another, have done something the Enforcers could nail us for. I mean nail us to the floor in the sunlight, with unsanded stakes, while spraying holy water in our faces with squirt guns, and shooting garlic powder up our noses with asthma inhalers. All of us.

Most of us manage not to get caught; or to fix whatever we screwed up before they get there, so we can look innocent and say "Who? Me? Noooo. I have no idea what you're talking about . . ." Then we learn our lesson and abide by the Code, not pushing our luck anymore.

Some people never learn, of course.

❑❑❑❑❑

Thursday night, 10:00 pm,
Toronto

I was still unpacking the moving boxes when Felix showed up. It was only an hour after sunset, with the full moon by now far overhead, and the October chill had just become cold enough to force me to put on a flannel shirt over my T-shirt and jeans. I didn't notice the buzzer until the third buzz because I had the boombox volume up too loud, blaring out "1999" like it was the end of the millennia already.

"My dear Morgana, if you must live in this . . . quaint . . . section of town, couldn't you at least have picked a building with a doorman?" Felix's cultured tones were plaintive and pained even through the static of the door speaker.

"C'mon up, you old fraud," I laughed in reply. Anything hinting at dirt outside of a flowerpot gives Felix hives. Not literally, of course; we don't get hives. Although, if any of us could, Felix probably *would*, just to prove how refined he is.

My financial advisor was bearing a house-warming gift which startled me out of my amusement. "One of your orchids? Are you kidding?" I asked, touched and a little stunned as he kissed me hello.

"You're one of the few of your century whom I'd trust with it. As long as you turn down that music." Felix winced, adjusting the volume on the radio. "Orchids are fragile, you know. And this place can use all the assistance I can render."

"It's not that bad."

Felix rolled his eyes and shuddered. He goes in for penthouse suites with their own arboretums, velvet drapes and dark mahogany; I tend to favor lofts with wood floors, throw pillows and lots of windows, which is a major pain in the day, but worth it at night. I'd even gotten a skylight with this one. As usual, the older vampire was perfectly dressed: Armani, Hermes, and onyx rings, all perfectly coordinated to set off his dark hair and eyes, not a hair out of place in his mustache. All of which made me feel even more scruffy by comparison, since I had dust and cardboard lint all over my jeans, and new rips in the shirt. Moving is a pain even for vampires. I'd have asked the Crew I used to hang with to help me move in, but some of the guys tend to be light-fingered as well as a bit cavalier about playing Catch with my lamps, and I really couldn't afford to replace half my stereo equipment again. I lost a really nice armchair on my last move, too, when they were playing Keep-Away with it . . .

"I don't understand why you insist on living in this dreary, loud section of town. It's utterly ugly—"

"It's the only place I can afford with everything I want. Besides, I like the noise. Lets me know I'm alive." I half-smiled. "Or whatever."

"Not true, sweetling. You could have taken the money Nick set up for you—"

"I don't need Nick's money! I'm a big girl, I can support myself." I got myself under control, closed my eyes at Felix's knowing expression, and forced myself to smile again. "Sorry, Felix. Just . . . let it go, okay? I'm making enough money from the last book to buy anything I need. Do you want a drink?"

"Please." Felix sat on one of the boxes and fastidiously wiped a cobweb away from one of the windows. "You have always had the oddest taste . . . You didn't bring the Neanderthal back with you from Omaha, I hope?"

Snorting with laughter, I brought him a glass of the Raven's special stock. "Get serious, Felix. He's still recovering from our last fight, and might take the rest of the century to do it. And it was Denver, not Omaha."

"Hmm." He took a sip. "Probably for the best. Nick might have been tempted to pound on him a bit, if what I've heard about your ex is true."

"Nick wouldn't have had anything to say about it," I responded coldly.

"Does he know you're in town?"

"No, he doesn't." Felix raised an expressive eyebrow. "What? I didn't feel like calling him yet," I said defensively.

"Are you aware that Lacroix is still here?"

"I got the sludge from the Raven, Felix, of course I know he's here. I managed to avoid him. What's your point?" I was snapping now, prowling around the boxes, unpacking books and not looking at my guest.

"My dear, all I'm saying is that no one wants a repeat of Houston. I hope you can manage to keep your conflict with Lacroix to a minimum. Some of your friends like you with your pretty head still connected to your shoulders." Felix set down his wineglass and rose to his feet. "And this time Janette won't be here to calm down Lacroix, or watch Nicholas's back. Or save your neck."

"It won't need saving. I'm not here to do anything about Lacroix. He can have his little kingdom or terrorist fiefdom or whatever the hell else he's got in the Raven and welcome to it, as far as I'm concerned." I walked Felix out of my apartment, then down to the elevator without speaking. "Thank you for the orchid, Felix. It was a very sweet gift."

"You're welcome, pet. Just . . . keep in mind what I said. Things are going well here. As well as they ever do, of course. We wouldn't like attention from . . . certain people. Would we?"

"No." I whispered, watching him get on the elevator. Slowly, I trudged back to my apartment, my good mood ruined. Maybe Toronto had been a mistake. Maybe I should have gone to Key West, or tried Hong Kong or something. But I missed Nick. And I'd wanted to see Janette. It was just a matter of rotten timing that she'd left barely two months before I arrived. Maybe in my next identity we'd run into each other.

I was almost done unpacking, and it was getting close to midnight, when I felt it. Sitting down hard, I concentrated on repelling the thought. **Go away!** Amusement was all I felt in return. **You're not welcome here. I don't want to talk to you. GO AWAY!**

I can wait forever, my dear.

Hell. He probably could. He's ten times my age, easily, and most of that time had been spent pushing at people, manipulating them. Plus, there is the very, very attenuated blood connection we share. There was only one sure way to get him out of my mind if he didn't want to go, and it cost too much to use lightly.

I walked up the stairs to the roof, opening the fire door to the gravel-covered rooftop and catching again the wondrous glimpse of the Toronto skyline that had sold me on the place. Lights everywhere, reflecting in the water, with the CN Tower dominating all of it.

Unfortunately, the scene was spoiled by the figure perched on the edge of the cement, smiling at me. "Ill-met by moonlight, fair Titania," he said, cocking his head and studying me intently.

"I didn't go looking for *you*, Lacroix. So don't blame if the meeting isn't to your liking."

"So defensive, Morgana le Fay." He laughed, and I cursed myself for acting the way he wanted me to. "Come, don't you have a sweeter welcome for your old Uncle?"

"Not really," I replied in a calmer tone, not reacting to his stupid nickname for me. "And you're not my uncle."

"Close enough." He hadn't changed, of course; it'll take more than fifteen years before he appears different. I have no idea how old Lacroix is; Janette wouldn't let me guess, and Nick had simply asked, "Does it matter?" Which, of course, is clue enough to how old he must be . . . He still had the same laser-light eyes, the same satisfied smile; but he'd gone a bit more upscale in his clothing since the last time I'd seen him, and the hair appeared darker. Dyed? Maybe. I think he might have started the punk look in the '70s, but since he's no slave to fashion, he probably dyed his hair back just to be difficult.

"I simply had to offer you a Canadian welcome to our fair city. It's been so very long. A pity you missed Janette, she will be disappointed." He grinned, the grin that always sends shivers up my spine. Thank God he was never my master. God and Nick. Otherwise . . .

"We'll catch up with each other somewhere. Paris, maybe, for the next fashion season," I replied, slowly approaching the edge of the roof where he sat. The moonlight did weird things to his eyes, the way it does to mine; although on him it's more impressive. Scarier.

If I ever get that scary, I hope someone stakes me.

"Have you had time to check in with Nicholas yet?"

"I don't have to . . ." I got a grip on myself as his grin widened and his eyes narrowed. He's always known how to push my buttons. But then, sometimes I get in a lucky shot or two also, just because I try. "No, I haven't seen Nick yet. I just got here. Why, have you lost him again?" I smiled sweetly as the smirk on his face vanished and the eyes got flat and nasty, like light reflecting off gunmetal.

"Petty of you, my dear," Lacroix whispered softly, staring off into the distance. "But then, you've never known who your real friends are, have you? So like Nicholas . . ." He recollected himself deliberately, while I quietly seethed. I always forget that playing with Lacroix means getting burned. "At any rate, I just came by to say 'hello' and to give you a piece of news you may be interested in."

"Oh?"

"Hmmmm. Yes. It seems that a certain young vampire has taken a mortal into his confidence. Broken the Code nine ways from hell, told her all sorts of things he shouldn't have. Terrible, isn't it?"

All my alarm bells went off. "Why would I be interested in that?"

He did an elaborate double-take, the reptile. Smiling in feigned surprise, Lacroix said, "Forgive me, but you *are* still an Enforcer, aren't you?"

My stomach dropped. How did he know? Had he told Nick? Oh, no, he couldn't have . . . "How do you know that?" I snarled, pure instinct rushing forward before I could control it, and I could feel my fangs drop as my eyes glazed in bloodlust.

Lacroix swallowed, and I could hear his heartbeat speed up infinitesimally. But he never lost his smile, or his cocky confidence. "One hears things, child. I have many, many contacts. I simply assumed that a staunch defender of the Code would *want* this information."

My eyes cleared, and my own heartbeat started to go back to normal. "I suppose that would be true. If I were an Enforcer."

"If you were," Lacroix agreed, obviously amused.

I hate him. I really, really hate him.

He turned toward the skyline, poised for flight. "Wait," I said, hating that he had me, hating that Lacroix knew what I'd become, and that he'd probably told Nick. But I had my duty. "The name of this person . . . You wouldn't happen to know it. Would you?"

"As a matter of fact—" Lacroix's eyes glittered "—it's Javier Vachon. You met him, once, a long time ago . . . but I doubt you remember it. You were rather—distressed at the time."

"And the name of the mortal?" I asked, wanting to bite him for mentioning that time. The time when I was crazy. Before Nick.

"Detective Tracy Vetter." He was watching me, his eyes feral with glee. It took me a second to get it.

"Nick's partner?" I said, aghast. Felix had told me all about Nick's current life as a police detective. And to think I'd been amused that we'd had so much in common.

"Quite. Now, of course, I know I can trust you to . . . handle the situation. Can't I, my dear?" Lacroix's smile was pure malice now. He isn't fond of me either. He bowed to me, then whispered, "Good night, sweet princess," and flew away.

I collapsed to my knees. *Don't do this to me*, I thought to the stars. *Don't. Don't make me choose. I can't, it's too hard. Let Lacroix be lying, like always. Let this be much, much less serious than he's hinting.*

I still didn't know if he'd told Nick that I'd become an Enforcer.

Several minutes later I got up again, and dragged myself back downstairs.

It had definitely been a mistake to come to Toronto.

2

Do you ever feel like you're drowning?

I've been fighting that feeling for over a month now, ever since I made detective. I did my time in blues, in a squad car, walking a beat; I had evidence, procedures, firearms, and interviewing suspects down cold. But I wasn't ready for this job. Not after dealing with bad domestic calls and serious bar fights, not even after doing a stint on the Scene-of-the-Crime team. I didn't have to think about *why* this stuff was happening then. I just did my job. I didn't have to face the reality of the kind of mind which thinks murder is fun and torture is hilarious. I didn't have to think about evil, back then.

Vachon would say I'd had it too easy, too protected. Too nice.

He should talk. He's half the reason I'm drowning.

☐☐☐☐☐

Friday evening, 7:53 PM

I'd gotten to work early, as usual; there's too much to do every day for tardiness, and I'm barely keeping up as it is. Not that anyone has said anything; but sometimes I wonder if that's only because they're afraid to criticize the Commissioner's daughter. Captain Reese has been encouraging, but the only person I can count on to really help me get the hang of this job is Nick. He's got enough commendations and tenure to get away with criticizing the Commissioner, much less his daughter, and I don't think he's looking for a promotion. My partner isn't what you'd call the ambitious type. Although some cops with Knight's experience and record would be pushing for lieutenant by now, Nick likes street work, and his disability limits him to night shift—which would be another plus if he wanted a desk and a title. Nobody else actually *likes* the night shift.

Nick wasn't in yet, so I started the paperwork for a warrant we'd need to search the school where a martial arts instructor was killed the week before. The owner hadn't exactly been cooperative, so I was double-checking my copy and crossing the *t*'s and dotting the *i*'s when the woman walked into the station.

She was around my age, my height, my build; and her jeans, high-tops and grey tweed blazer weren't dissimilar from what I had on that evening. But she was . . . different.

Don't get me wrong. I'm pretty, and there are men out there who have a fascination with blue-eyed blondes, so I get my share of attention. But this woman belonged on a magazine cover, she looked so perfect. Flawless skin, thick dark brown hair, and big green eyes with foot-long lashes; half the patrolmen were doing double-takes when she walked by. None of which seemed to make an impact on her. She stopped, talked to one of our clerks, glanced in my direction, and then headed across the squad room for my desk without giving any of them a second look. I watched her warily as she approached, hoping she wasn't a reporter. With that face and attitude, she was a dead lock to replace Maria Shriver, if she ever wanted to retire.

"Detective Tracy Vetter?" she asked. Something about the husky voice tugged at me, something familiar, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

"Actually, I was looking for your partner. Nick isn't in yet, hunh?" She stuck her hands in her pockets, gazing around the station with curiosity, eyes lingering on my desk, then back up to my face.

"No, he isn't. Are you a friend of his, Ms. . . . I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Probably because I didn't throw it." She grinned when I giggled at the lame joke, and the sculpted cheekbones and jawline softened into something less intimidating. I keep trying to control that giggle, it's not exactly dignified, but sometimes I have a "blonde moment" and it comes out. It's such an asset to my career . . .

"I'm sorry. My name's Morgana Harte, I'm an old friend of Nick's, I just got into Toronto." We shook hands as she went on. I could detect the faintest trace of a southern US drawl to her speech. "A mutual friend of ours mentioned that Nick had a new partner. How are you settling into the job?"

I grimaced, then shrugged. "The honeymoon is over." The woman seemed nice enough, but I kept staring at her as we talked, trying to place where I knew her from. Mug shots? Television? Another precinct? Nah. She didn't seem like another cop, and she would have identified herself by now.

"So soon." Ms. Harte laughed. "Is Nick so hard to work with?"

"Nick's fine, it's the night shift that's killing me. I'm much more of a morning person," I said hastily. Finally, I couldn't stop myself from asking, "Do I know you from somewhere?"

She blinked, tilted her head, and smiled, showing lots of even, perfect, white teeth. "I don't know. Do you?"

"I could swear . . ."

Just then Nick entered the squad room and spotted our visitor. He stopped dead, blinked, and headed straight for her. "Morgan?" His usual laid-back demeanor was animated by a big grin. She hadn't been kidding about being old friends, at least not from what I could see. He hugged her hard, lifting her off her feet for a second and kissing her on the cheek. "What are you *doing* here? Why didn't you call? I could have picked you up at the airport . . ."

If Nick seemed happy to see her, it was nothing compared to Morgana Harte's reaction. Her face lit up like a kid's on Christmas, and she was chuckling around his questions, hugging him back just as hard, if not harder. "I moved here, which is why I didn't call, because I drove, and I knew you'd offer to help me move, and I wanted it to be a surprise."

"That's terrific, I can't believe it!" Nick laughed. I was glad to see him happy; sometimes I worry about him. He doesn't have a family, his last partner died just last month, he doesn't have a steady girlfriend—although I've heard inconclusive rumors about him and one of the nicer MEs, Natalie Lambert. It was good to know he had *some* life outside the police station, though.

"Tracy, this is Morgan, an old friend of mine," Nick turned to me, still smiling.

"We've met. Is she someone famous? She looks familiar," I said, leaning back in my chair.

"Depends on your definition of famous," my partner replied with a sly grin and a sideways glance at his friend. She groaned and punched him lightly on his arm.

"Cut it out. I'm not famous."

"What, the New York Times Bestseller list isn't famous?"

"Not the way she means it—"

"Morgan writes mystery thrillers under another name," Nick interrupted, giving the lady a squeeze and a look full of pride. "Faye Corde?"

"I love those books." I stared back at his by-now-embarrassed companion. "The ones set in Renaissance Italy? Intrigues and murder among the aristocracy? Those books, right?"

Morgana Harte nodded, then mock-glared at Knight. "That can't be where she recognizes me from, Nick. I don't let them put my picture on the flyleaf of those things. Demanding mobs of fans I do *not* need," she said emphatically. Then she waved the question away impatiently. "Anyway, I came by to invite you to breakfast, or a midnight snack, when you're off shift."

"I'd love to, but I don't know when I can—"

"Please?" Morgana begged, eyes wide and hopeful. Nick shook his head ruefully as she added, "Say yes, Nick. Say yes, you know you want to. C'mon, I kept your favorite in my fridge—"

"What's his favorite?" I asked idly, watching Knight try to deny her request, obviously torn between spending time with his friend, and the knowledge that we'd probably be busting bad guys well toward sunrise. They didn't seem like ex-lovers, or just friends; more like big brother and baby sister. Like me and Bruce, before it all ended.

The woman's eyes narrowed, stabbing at me like daggers for a second, then she blinked, and bamph, the hostility was gone, leaving me wondering if I'd imagined it. The sense of recognition was abruptly stronger; I almost knew . . . "Protein drink," she replied, eyes full of hilarity. My partner snickered. Obviously, it was some private joke between the two of them.

"Okay, okay. If you promise to stay out of trouble." Nick's voice was stern, but his expression was anything but forbidding.

"Until breakfast?" The southern accent was exaggerated now, and Morgana batted her lashes at him. "Oh, golly, Nicholas, how ever will I manage that?"

"Just do it, Morgan, for the sake of my sanity?"

"O-kaaaay. Sheesh. I can see I'm going to have to take you out for some fun, get you a life or something . . ." Morgana kissed him good-bye before Nick could find a comeback, said, "It was real nice meeting you, Tracy. See ya later," then strolled off toward the exit, causing one or two minor collisions as she left.

"Nice girl," I said absently, still trying to figure out what I'd recognized about her.

Knight laughed at me. "Girl? I thought you were a feminist, Tracy, and she's older than you are."

"Well, she doesn't seem like it," I said, brooding on what had made me think I knew her. Her voice, and the eyes, and . . . nothing. Well, I'd remember eventually.

For an instant the image of Vachon flashed across my mind. Something about her had reminded me of him. I had no idea why. Or maybe I just had vampires on the brain. It's pretty difficult to work something that weird into your world view, no matter how much time you give it.

I didn't let myself consider that maybe I just had one specific vampire on the brain.

Determinedly, I turned back to the arrest reports and concentrated on work. It was a long enough night without thinking about Spanish vampires camped out in churches, British vampires in sewers, and Incan vampires exploding into flames.

3

Friday night, 10:32 PM

I was ready to kill someone, if necessary, by the time I reached the Raven. Preferably Lacroix, although I knew he wouldn't give me an excuse. He'd been at least partially correct about the "situation". Tracy Vetter wasn't anyone's thrall, and I was beginning to believe she might know about vampires. Her reactions to me were just a little too suspicious. Which put me in an ugly position, unless I could get Javier Vachon to straighten the mess out by himself.

When I walked in, the music was deafening, with the sonics on the amplifier buzzing through my chest bone. I gritted my teeth at the vibrations and struggled through the massed bodies, bumping into a guy with a Mohawk, nose ring and face paint who snarled at me. I snarled back, and he blinked, nonplused, and got out of my way. Loud music I like; bright lights and garish costumes I like. A little random chaos is a beautiful thing, but sensory overload makes me cranky.

The bar was being tended by a short guy with bushy hair who I didn't recognize. I'd seen Brianna doing a slow bump-and-grind with a mortal on the dance floor, and Miklos at one of the darker booths, deeply engrossed in a conversation with someone's fledgling, although probably not one of his. There'd be time to catch up with them later. "Lacroix!" I screamed over the music when I finally got the bartender's attention. "I need to talk to him!" The mortal pointed toward the back of the bar, mouthed something like, "I wouldn't . . ." But I was already headed toward the room he'd pointed out.

A bright red light proclaiming ON THE AIR was shining over the door. I stopped, remembering what Felix had said about Lacroix's show. Easing the door open softly, I saw the 'Nightcrawler' bent over a microphone, the console lights throwing odd shadows across his face. He was talking in a mesmeric tone. Even I have to admit he's got charisma. You can hate him, you can adore him, but you can't ignore him. Even if you want to.

"Yes, my children, tonight, we are discussing . . . duty."

I swallowed, and leaned against the door as he continued, "A much-underrated word in these corrupt times. Promises are made to be broken, it is said. Loyalties shift with self-interest." He paused, letting the words sink in. "'Give me the man who is not passion's slave and I will wear him in my heart's core aye, in my heart of hearts as I do thee.' Who among us has not wished to put aside our obligations, our promises, for emotional excuses? Can there be . . ." His voice softened, caressing, fatherly; terrifying. ". . . forgiveness, for the forsworn?" He cued up a song; Sting's "Why Should I Cry For You" came through the speakers as he raised his icy eyes from the control board to meet mine.

"How goes your 'investigation'?" Lacroix's voice rippled with insinuatory amusement. At my expense. I wished I knew what game he was playing. Why should he care what Javier Vachon did, when he'd been guilty of worse in his time?

"Fine. Where can I find Vachon?" I didn't look at him. I might have been tempted to smash his head into the console.

"I understand that there's a condemned church which he haunts upon occasion." He handed me a slip of paper with the address. "Although if he's not there, he'll eventually show up here." I stared sightlessly at the paper. "Tell me, what do you think of the show?"

"Interesting topic choice. Although there's some that would consider you hypocritical for preaching about loyalty." The bitterness seeped through despite my best efforts at dispassion.

"When have I ever betrayed one of my own?" Lacroix asked, his face a parody of wounded hurt.

"When have you not? When haven't you done your best to manipulate and control Nick, Janette, Alexandra . . . me . . ."

"Ah, but you were never one of mine, were you?" His smile was knife-thin, knife-sharp.

"No. Never." I glared at him. "I still remember what you said that night. That I'd be better off dead. That you'd all be better off with me dead."

"And so we would have been," Lacroix's face was placid, kind. "You nearly exposed all of us. If Nicholas had not intervened—"

"You'd have thrown me to the Enforcers, to save your own skin."

"Of course." He shook his head slowly, the picture of weary forbearance. "My loyalties have never been in question, to either the Code or my children, errant though some of them may be. You, on the other hand—"

"I'm loyal to the Code," I snapped. "I'm more loyal than you are. I understand the reasons for it, and I abide by the spirit, not just the letter, the way you do."

"Then I assume that Detective Vetter is dead?"

I looked away. "That may not be necessary."

"No?"

Turning away, I heard his voice behind me. "You do realize, of course, that Nicholas must be aware of her knowledge." I closed my eyes. The amused, aristocratic voice pounded into my brain like the amplified music, but so much softer, and so much more difficult to shut out. "But of course you do. You were many things, but you were never blind. Or stupid. I know you will do the right thing." He sounded on the verge of laughter.

I didn't give him the satisfaction of slamming the door when I left.

4

Very early Saturday morning, 1:15 am

The phone was ringing, and no one else was in the lab at 1 a.m., but I had to finish the dissection of the hit-and-run victim on the table within the next hour if I wanted the evidence to be admissible and accurate. Thank God for intercoms. I hit the button with my elbow, said "Morgue, Lambert here," and went back to the analysis.

"Natalie? It's Nick."

"Hi ya. I was wondering when you'd call. We're almost finished with the blood work on the Jacoby case. I'm sort of in the middle of something right now, can I call you back?"

"It's not about the case. Look, I know you were going to come over tomorrow and run some tests, but I'm going to have to take a rain check."

"Nick!" I put down my scalpel in exasperation, feeling a frown form even though he wasn't there to see it. "I need—*you* need—to have those tests done soon. Don't think you're going to get out of this. I'm not going to re-run all those measurements on your white-bloodcell count just to get data I can't use . . ."

"I'm not canceling, Nat. Just postponing. I've got a guest for the day, an old friend. Please? Say you understand?"

"I understand." *Too well*, I thought.

Drumming my fingers on the table, I shook my head as he went on, "I wouldn't cancel if I didn't have to, you know that. It isn't safe for too many of us to know about you. For either of us. And I haven't seen Morgana in fifteen years." I mouthed the name 'Morgana' silently as he kept talking; why haven't I met a vampire yet with an ordinary name? Like Kathy? or Ellen? "If you come by after dark tomorrow night she should be ready to leave by then."

"I'll call first. Okay?"

"Thanks, Nat." The warmth in his voice made me wonder how close he was to his "guest". Down, Natalie. "I was thinking of renting *Love at First Bite* before you came over. Anything you'd like to see?"

"Well . . . I'll bring something. Something funny for you to watch while I poke you full of holes." I kept the acid in my voice down to a reasonable level. Sometimes Nick can be so . . . dense. "Gotta go, Nick. I've got to finish this. See you tomorrow night." I hung up the phone with my scalpel before he could say anything else, and mechanically went back to my examination.

Ever since Janette left and Lacroix took over the Raven, Nick hadn't been hanging out with his "old friends" as often. I wasn't sorry. One less temptation to divert him from his goal, in my opinion. I'd almost . . . missed . . . Janette, but her absence did make our efforts to find Nick a cure a little less complicated. I don't know why I'd thought there wouldn't be other "old friends" around, either attempting to convince him to quit trying to become human, or just putting him in situations that would make it more difficult. It wasn't like I'd forgotten who my chief adversary was. Had always been.

Finishing the autopsy, I turned the radio station to CERK as I typed in the reports. Listening to Lacroix always motivates me. Nick says that occasionally Lacroix can pick up on his thoughts, and will address what's on his mind over the radio. The eerie tones of "Falling" from the *Twin Peaks* soundtrack were just fading away.

Sometimes I wonder what will happen after I do find a cure. Nick will be fine, he'll be happy, but for how long? How long does he expect Lacroix to accept the situation before he decides to get revenge—or tries to turn Nick back into a vampire? I make plans in my mind, for running away. Escape. And I wonder if Nick'll still want me to go with him, by then.

It's been eight months since Valentine's Day. Eight months of letting both of them think that I don't remember what happened in the restaurant; eight months of being "just friends" with Nick again. Schanke and Cohen are dead, Janette is gone, Lacroix's still here, I'm still here. Still friends. When I wonder why, I tune in the "Nightcrawler" on CERK and listen to that smug, arrogant voice taunting me. The one that says Nick will never be anything else, anything more.

And I get back to work, with more reason than ever to help Nick.

The Nightcrawler was laughing softly now at a caller who was quoting Shakespeare back to him. "To thine own self be true," said the caller, an older man. "That's the first loyalty. You can't be true to anyone else if you're not true to yourself first."

"Ah. But aren't we the sum of what others have made us? Our outside influences? If we forget those to whom we owe what we've become, we can not be truly what we are." Another soft laugh, more condescension and superiority than amusement. "Deny the ties all you wish. Claim for yourself 'free will' and 'choice'. I say that we diminish the more we change."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, setting my jaw in determination. *You can say anything you want,* I thought. *It doesn't change the truth. Nick owes you nothing anymore.*

"And now I must play a dedication. For a very young child named Morgana." I blinked, wondering what he was up to. And why would he dedicate a song to Nick's friend? "The certainties of youth, my listeners, are wonderful. To love with all one's heart. To hate with all your soul. To know, with absolute surety, what is right, and what is wrong. One can only envy that . . . simplicity." The music started, and I recognized it with surprise; Lacroix isn't fond of rap. Coolio's voice rang out with authority and menace.

As I walk through of the Valley of the Shadow of Death
I take a look at my life and realize 's not much left . . .

Lacroix's playing of "Gangsta's Paradise" made me wonder if I'd been completely off in my suspicions about Nick's "friend". Not that there was anything I could do if I was right. But still . . .

. . . maybe I wouldn't call before I went over to Nick's tomorrow. I suddenly wanted to meet someone who'd inspire Lacroix to play rap.

5

Saturday morning, 6:31 am

I'd gotten home exhausted, worn out more from the effort of thinking about ten things at once than from chasing criminals on foot. The evidence from the Jacoby case suggested that more than one killer was involved; the search of the martial arts studio had turned up nothing we could use; and the interrogation of one of our gangland slaying suspects had been pointless, an obvious dead-end. Not a good night.

Slipping my shoes off as I closed the door behind me, I remembered one other small, minuscule detail that had been bugging me through the shift. It was silly, really.

Morgana Harte had reminded me of Vachon.

I flopped down into the easy chair, watching the sky lighten through my living room windows. It'd be another forty minutes before the sun was up. He'd probably still be awake, if I wanted to call him. If I waited much longer it would only be rude, since he'd probably be going to sleep soon. But it wasn't like I was in the habit of calling him; we weren't exactly friends. Not that we weren't friends, in fact. It was just difficult to explain what we were. Acquaintances? Allies?

Aside from Screed, I didn't know of any other vampires. I didn't know if any more lived in Toronto, or even in the world. The only other one I'd met was dead. Although, I had my suspicions about the patrons of that bar Vachon hung out in . . . the Raven. I wasn't sure I'd recognize another vampire if I saw one. Except—

—except that the things about Morgana Harte that had made me think I knew her were all things I associated with Vachon. The perfect, pale skin, the even white teeth, the air of hostility; all of them, and maybe, possibly, something I'd seen in her eyes . . .

I grabbed the cellphone and punched in Vachon's number before I gave myself time to think. This was too stupid to worry about. I'd just call him, and he'd say, *No, Trace, I've never met a vampire named Morgana,* and then I'd describe her, and he'd say, *Nope, not familiar, and Trace, we have got to have a talk about this paranoia of yours.* There wouldn't be a problem.

Which wouldn't necessarily mean I was wrong about her. But what could I do about it? Aside from grill Nick about her again. And that had gone so well during the shift, that I wasn't willing to try that again.

"So you two met in Houston," I said, carefully not looking at my partner as he drove his Caddy down Greenleaf Avenue. "Where in Houston? When? Has she always been a writer?"

Nick raised an eyebrow in surprise. "You're that big a fan?"

"Well, yes," I admitted, since it was the truth. Faye Corde's books had always been my favorites, ever since I was in high school. I frowned. "How old is she? I thought Faye Corde started writing in the early 80's. She must have started awfully young."

My partner shrugged, seeming slightly amused by the question. "Older than she looks—closer to my age than yours. She looks younger because she's never in the sun. Morgana has the same skin disease I do. That's how we met in Houston, at a treatment clinic there."

"Oh." I digested this while we waited at the light. Nick's skin allergy hasn't ever stopped him from being a good detective, or from having a normal life. But . . . wouldn't it be convenient, if you were a vampire, to claim that kind of disability? Nick, of course, is completely normal; Vachon had to hypnotize him to make him forget parts of our first case. Sometimes I still felt guilty about that, and about keeping secrets from my partner. But it wasn't my secret, and it wouldn't be fair to Vachon to tell Nick everything I knew just to ease my conscience. "She's a terrific writer. Sometimes I think she could have been part of Renaissance Venice, she makes it seem so . . . real."

Knight grinned in pride. "She has quite an imagination."

"Were you and she ever involved?"

For some reason this seemed to irritate him when my other questions hadn't. "What is this, Twenty Questions? No, we were never 'involved,' as you put it."

"Sorry," I apologized, widening my eyes in innocence. "I was just curious."

"Yeah, well . . ." Nick shrugged, lips still thin in annoyance. "She's like a kid sister to me. And she values her privacy. So please don't ask me anything more, all right?"

"All right," I assented as we reached the martial arts studio. "Consider me completely quiet on the subject."

Nick smiled sheepishly. He shut off the car, then turned to me and asked, "Look, if you want, I'll get you an autographed copy of her latest book. She just moved here, though, so—"

"Don't bother her. I understand, Nick." I grinned, letting the subject slide away. "So, who gets to be the good cop this time?"

If I was right, and I hoped I wasn't, then what? There was no way I was going to let her know that I knew. Screed had suggested breaking my neck when he found out about my knowledge of Vachon. But maybe I'd tell Nick. So far all the lies I'd told had been to shield him from the weirdness of what happened with Vudu. If it started putting his life in danger, I wasn't going to keep lying.

"Vachon," mumbled a sleepy voice at the other end of the connection. "This better be good."

"It's Tracy. I've got a question for you."

"Make it fast, Trace. It's been a long night. Very long." Vachon sounded grimmer than usual, maybe because the sun was almost rising.

"Do you know a vampire named Morgana?"

Silence, then a muffled curse in Spanish. "You did figure it out, didn't you? I tried to tell her you had no idea—"

I let out a breath, shaky and scared. "She came to visit you? Why? Who is she?"

"Trouble. Look, we might as well get this settled as soon as possible. Can you come to the church? Now?"

Mentally I wrote off my plans for sleeping in that evening. It was Saturday morning, and I wasn't supposed to be back in the precinct until Monday, so . . . "Okay. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Don't tell anyone about this."

"We're going to have to talk about that, too."

"Just don't tell anyone anything until after I've had a chance to explain. We're both in a lot of trouble, and we're going to have to think fast before someone gets hurt." He disconnected without saying anything more, and I hung up the phone slowly, feeling my muscles ache with tiredness. With a feeling like lead weights attached to my body, I slipped my shoes on again, grabbed my keys, purse, and gun, and headed out the door.

❑❑❑❑❑

I got to the church at about half-past six; the bright morning sunshine making my night-time suspicions seem stranger than before. In the half-light of the old church, they didn't feel as ridiculous. I kept glancing around, certain I'd see her somewhere, green eyes glowing, fangs extended to sink into my neck. As I climbed up into the disused belfry, the safety I'd felt in the bright sunlight faded away completely.

White sheets still covered everything, with candles lit to provide the little light there was. It looked like a scene from a music video, with the main player center stage. Vachon had his back to me, idly playing some discordant notes on his guitar. He stilled the strings and spoke without turning toward me. "You shouldn't have let on that you knew."

"I didn't think I had!" I marched over to face him, looking down into his eternally young face. J.D. Valdez—Javier Vachon—is always twenty-five years old, always handsome, always ironic, and usually not a bad guy. *For a blood-sucking creature of the night,* I added mentally to myself. "Who is she, Vachon? How did she figure out that I knew? Have you seen her? Where do you know her from?"

He smiled without humor, gestured me to a seat which I didn't take, and glanced back down at the quiet guitar. "Do you always interrogate suspects like that, Detective Vetter? Not give them a chance to take a breath or answer a question, just intimidate them by sheer volume?" I pressed my lips together in fury, then sat down, giving him a chance to talk.

When he saw that he had my attention, he started talking, his voice flat and expressionless, dark eyes fixed on something I couldn't see. "She came to see me earlier tonight. She'd heard from someone—she wouldn't say who—that you'd found out about me, and that I knew about it and hadn't done anything. I tried to tell her that you didn't know anything, that I'd erased your memory."

"Did she believe you?" I started worrying at my fingernail, another bad habit that I've almost kicked. But not quite.

"No." He focused on me now, and sat up a little straighter. "She's an Enforcer." At my blank look, he half-laughed, shaking his head. "Think of the mob, or the CIA. That'll give you an idea of what she is. She's supposed to stop mortals from knowing about us."

"Stop them from knowing about you. How?"

"Any way she wants." Vachon looked away, stood up and put the guitar down. "She gave me an ultimatum. Deal with you within forty-eight hours. Or she'd do it herself." He paced a few steps, then turned back. "That means kill you, erase your memory, bring you over, or make you a thrall."

"What a terrific set of choices," I said. I could scarcely breathe, I was so scared. "What's a thrall? Do I want to know?"

Regret flashed across the vampire's face before he managed to mask it behind the expressionless front again. "A slave." He grinned at the my look of distaste. "Yeah, I know, I don't think much of the idea either. But it's either that, or worse."

"Wait a minute! Don't I get a say?"

Vachon blinked, then smiled, crossing his arms across his chest and raising his eyebrows. "Have you got a better idea?"

"Well . . . yeah! Can't we talk her out of this?" He laughed outright, hilarity rippling across his face. "Okay, if that's not an option . . ." I paused, thinking hard. "How hard will it be to convince her that I've forgotten?"

"Nearly impossible. You can lie to Enforcers, but you have to make it practically airtight." Vachon bit his lip, eyes closed. "I have an idea that might work. But you won't like it. You're going to have to trust me."

I decided I didn't want to address that new idea right now. "You know she's a friend of my partner's. I've got to warn Nick."

"NO." Vachon's eyes snapped open. "Definitely not. You'll only put him in danger." As I drew breath to argue, he said, "Look, Trace, he's safe with her. She isn't going to kill him, or turn him, he's got too many friends and he's too obvious. Right now, Nick Knight is the safest person in the city. *We're* the ones with the problem. Do you want to get Nick hurt, too?"

I shook my head, chewing on my thumbnail again.

"Then let it go. For now. She'll be back here Monday morning if I don't call her. But if we go with my plan, we can have this settled by tomorrow night."

"What plan?"

He told me what he thought we should do, and I hated it. I raised a couple hundred objections, all of which he countered. In the end I was quiet. He sat down next to me and took my hand. "Do you trust me?"

"I don't know." I turned my face to him, seeing the sad eyes and mocking half-smile. Trust him? He hadn't killed me when we first met, when it would have been the easiest thing to do. But this situation was a lot more difficult. I wanted to feel safe, to believe that the hands holding mine weren't going to break my neck. "Why are you so sure she won't let this go?"

"I met her once. About thirty years ago." Vachon's smile was rueful, almost impressed. "She was crazier than I am. Crazier than anyone. I wouldn't take her on for love or money or season tickets to the Jays. If I try to fight her . . ." He paused, then let go of my hand and stood up, walking back over to the chair that held his guitar. He didn't finish the sentence, but it was obvious what he meant. He'd lose. And Morgana Harte would kill me.

"Okay," I whispered. I was shaking. This wasn't supposed to happen. My normal life and my friendship with Vachon weren't supposed to interfere. But I couldn't forget, and I didn't want to die. And if I trusted him, maybe it would work out.

"This won't work unless you're sure."

"I'm sure."

He studied me for a minute, then nodded. "Come back at sundown. I'll call her. And . . . there might be one more option. I hope."

I nodded, then stood up and walked for the exit.

"Trace."

I turned, and met his eyes. Human, normal eyes, which I'd seen flash with yellow fire and rage when provoked. But now they were just tired, confused. He's over four hundred years old, and for a second, I could believe it.

"I won't let her hurt you."

I nodded, calm. "I know." Then turned back to the stairs before I had to explain how I knew that. It wasn't something I wanted to explain to myself, much less Vachon. I just hoped I wasn't wrong.

6

Once upon a Halloween in the sixties . . .

Four young women attending Rice University in Houston went to a party given in the rich and sleazy part of town, secure in the fact that they were together and nothing bad could ever happen to them. At this party they met a charming and rich man, who invited them to another party in a richer and sleazier part of town. Confident that only the timid suffer, they got into a limousine with him and went to a private party, where they had a lovely time.

The first young lady took drugs from anyone who offered them, mixed them with champagne, and woke up in the emergency room, getting her stomach pumped.

The second young lady went off to a private bedroom with one of the guests, had a wonderful, passionate, physical interlude with him, shortly followed by her death from an (apparently) slit throat.

The third young lady got scared by one of the guests, tried to leave, was restrained, and died two days later from a stake through the heart. No one's quite sure where she was during those two days . . .

The fourth young lady drank an awful lot of champagne, danced on the balcony, kissed many guests, met the man whom the second young lady had encountered, and woke up a vampire the next morning.

There is no apparent moral to this story.

But I'll bet Lacroix would like it anyway.

❑❑❑❑❑

Saturday morning, 7:42 am

Nick's place was what I expected: eclectic, open, with a ton of strange and interesting *objets d'art* and (of course) sun tokens everywhere. It was cozy and a trifle depressing. I'd brought along my own bottle from the Raven, since my taste for things bovine died thirty years ago along with my mortality. Sometimes I can still remember the taste of an extra-juicy, thick hamburger with tomato and cheese and lettuce, and I can understand why Nick wants to be human.

Then I remember that he's giving up *flying*, and the whole concept of mortality becomes incomprehensible again. I miss sunlight. I miss food. I miss my family, although there's nothing I can do about that now. But the weakness of being mortal . . . of being afraid, physically afraid, to walk down a deserted street; getting sick, getting old, getting hurt . . . Maybe when I've existed eight centuries, I'll want my mortality back. But not yet.

I studied the sun disk on the wall as Nick poured the drinks. "Did you have this in Venice?"

"No. It was in storage in Paris. You're thinking of the tapestry—"

"You're right, the one with the unicorn." I smiled at him as he handed me my goblet. "What happened to that?"

Nick grimaced ruefully. "Janette won it off me in a card game about a year later. I think she wanted it only to burn it, because she thought it was trash."

I giggled and took a long, slow sip of the blood, letting it pool in my mouth before I swallowed. The day had just dawned, and Nick had gotten off shift half an hour before. I'd been waiting for him on his front steps when he came home, just like old times. It had been a very difficult evening. First the encounter with Nick's partner, and then the confrontations with Lacroix and Vachon. The blood was restoring my lost equilibrium, but not as quickly as I wished it would. Being around Nick was always slightly upsetting; being reminded of the past by Vachon was deeply unpleasant. Another long draught of the blood, and I was almost relaxed enough to act normal.

"So." I turned away, wandering aimlessly around his loft, picking up things and putting them down as I talked. A pillow here, a statue there, a candle holder, then a remote. "Felix said you're still trying to cross back."

Nick raised his eyebrows, his expression calm but just a bit defensive. "Yes, that's right."

"You still think it can be done?"

He shook his head as I wandered by the CD player, fiddling with the buttons until the radio came on. His expression wasn't one of denial, but of weariness, as if he'd had this discussion a million times before. "I have to keep hoping it's possible, Morgan. If I thought it wasn't . . ." Nick shrugged and took a sip of the cow's blood. How he could drink it without grimacing was beyond me. His expression didn't reveal anything of his feelings, either of displeasure with the drink or the topic of conversation.

"If you thought it wasn't?" I encouraged him, seating myself on the leather couch, and patting the cushion next to me.

"I don't know what I'd do," he said quietly, walking around the end table to join me on the couch.

A shiver went over me. "Don't talk like that," I ordered.

He tilted his head at me, then raised a hand to stroke my hair. "I wouldn't walk into the sun, if that's what you're thinking." The stroking was calming, soothing me without my realizing it, bringing back more memories. "I'd probably just bury myself for a century or so, until a cure could be found."

"You're talking like it's a curse, or a disease, or—"

"It is for me, Morgan." Nick's eyes were so calm and clear. He'd always been able to do that; discuss the most painful things with that stoic endurance. Except for Lacroix. "I've had enough of immortality. Of watching people I love die. Of making up for sins I'd rather not remember. Of looking on human beings as a source of food." He took another sip from his goblet while I toyed with mine, feeling half-guilty and half-resentful that I couldn't force myself to drink cow. He got a glimpse of my face from behind his cup, and smiled as he put the drink down on the end table and pulled me into a hug.

"I'm not saying you have to do this, Morgan. This is what's right for me. I *need* to become human." He stroked my hair again, and I thought about how it had been when I first met him; how I would have done anything he asked, anything he even mentioned once, just to please him. "Can't you accept that?"

"I guess." It came out as a whisper. I closed my eyes and hugged him back, hard. I'm glad I don't love him anymore, not like I used to. Even though I could almost wish that he'd felt for me, just for a little while, what I'd felt for him. "But it doesn't mean I won't miss you. A lot. It . . . doesn't seem fair. I can't imagine the rest of my life without you."

Nick pulled away, and grinned boyishly, looking younger than me for a couple seconds. "It'll be a while, you know. It hasn't happened yet. And I should still have a full mortal lifespan after I've crossed back."

"It's still too short."

He sobered, his face becoming serious. "You'll have Janette. And you don't need me anymore, m'love."

"Maybe not." I sighed and straightened up, then stood up to wander around the apartment again. "But it's not like I can forget what I owe you."

Nick looked down at his glass, not meeting my eyes. "You don't owe me anything."

I snorted, then chuckled aloud in disbelief, rolling my eyes when he finally glanced back at me, startled by my laughter. "Nick . . ." I gestured futilely with my hands, trying to think of where to start. "I owe you everything."

"I'm not asking for—"

"I know, I know," I interrupted, waving his objections away. "You're not Lacroix; you're not interested in mind control or absolute possession. You're not asking that I pay you back. But don't you see, Nick, I want to. I wish . . . I wish there was something I could do, to make us even." *Maybe keeping you safe from Vachon and Tracy will be enough,* I thought to myself.

"Is that why you wouldn't take the money in the account?" Knight's gaze was penetrating, and I didn't have any trouble believing he was good at his new job.

"Part of it." I shrugged, feeling embarrassed. "Felix talks too much. He shouldn't have told you I put it back." I stood in front of one of Nick's paintings, all bold splashes of blue and gold, with green edges. I traced the curve of a green wave into a gold swirl into a blue whirlpool. "You don't have to support me, I'm not your responsibility. I *can* get by on my own."

"If you need the money, you should have it." Nick put up a hand to stop my protest when I turned around. "I may not have brought you over, but technically, you're still part of my family. Maybe I'm not going to be a vampire for much longer—or maybe I'll be one for another century. Whichever way it works out—" He stood and took my hand, kissed my palm softly, then curled his fingers around it "—you can always count on me."

"I always could." I smiled, remembering . . .

❑❑❑❑❑

1967
Houston, Texas

"You should have left her to the Enforcers."

I didn't open my eyes; I was too comfortable where I was. Soft sheets, soft pillow, quiet, dark . . . Why should I move? The words I was hearing didn't make sense anyway. Not then.

"It wasn't her fault." A different voice, quieter, but more intense.

"Then whose fault was it? Elliot's? He's dead. Very, very dead. She's dangerous, Nicholas. You'll end up exsanguinated, or ripped to shreds, as he was. You can't control a rogue." A slight British accent, maybe; different from the long slow Texas drawls I was used to. A voice that cut like a sword. Not brittle, not thin like glass, but all steel and razor brilliance.

"I don't have to. She's tired now, and scared. In a while, after she's had a chance to get her bearings, she won't need me so much." A nice voice. I liked it. I didn't know what he was talking about, or who this "she" they kept discussing was. But I was on this one's side.

"You're delirious." Amusement, superiority, a certain contempt. I burrowed deeper into the cool sheets, farther away from that voice. "Do you think a voluntary blood bond will be enough? It won't be, I assure you. Just wait, Nicholas. She'll get hungry again. And when you can't supply her with victims quickly enough, she'll turn on you."

"You're wrong." The calm voice again, the one I liked. He talked for a while, and I drifted back to sleep, lulled by the surety and the kindness of words I couldn't comprehend.

7

Saturday afternoon, around 4 p.m.

I awoke disoriented, thinking I was in Houston again, staying in Nick's town home while the Enforcers looked for me. It took a minute to get my bearings. I'd fallen asleep on the couch sometime around noon, after talking and laughing with Nick for what must have been hours. I relaxed back onto the couch, looking up at the ceiling, wondering when it would be dark enough to leave. There was still a ton of moving-in things to be done at my apartment; and if Vachon had left me a message, I'd have to get it soon. Letting him have too much time to think might be a bad idea.

"You're wrong." Nick's voice, low and harsh, upstairs. I tensed, not wanting to eavesdrop, but the level of anger being expressed was impossible to ignore. "Fine. I'll take care of it." Fast footsteps above me, and then Nick was descending the staircase, jaw set, fingers clenched around the cellphone.

"Who was that?" I mumbled, sitting up and straightening my clothes.

"Javier Vachon. He claims you're an Enforcer." Nick was standing in front of me, his gaze searching mine, pleading without words for my denial. At the first syllable of his answer, I froze, surprised and furious at Vachon's tactic.

"Really." I raised my eyebrows, then shrugged.

"Is it true?" The pain in Nick's face was everything I'd expected; as if Vachon had accused me of every crime in the world, and Nick was afraid it was all gospel. I suppose in his book, being an Enforcer *is* a crime.

I tried to laugh, standing and looking around for my shoes, not meeting his gaze. I could see him out of the corner of my eye, tense and wary. "Me? An Enforcer? Get serious, darlin'. Why would I sign up for the Marines?"

"You're lying." That harshness again, Nick's voice getting quiet and chill. "Your accent always gets stronger when you lie."

I stopped looking for my shoes, and forced myself to look at him. The pain was still there, but worse was the distrust that I'd known he'd feel after I told him. I swallowed, searching for words.

"How could you?" Nick spat out the question through clenched teeth. I tried to answer, to tell him why I'd become one of the Code's defenders, but that wasn't what he was asking. "How could you place Vachon in a position like this? Tell him he had to 'take care' of Tracy, or you would?!"

"I didn't put him in this position, he did that all by his ownsome," I snapped. "You *know* the Code. Dammit, Nick, having your partner know about Vachon endangers you, too! She might figure it out—"

"So it *is* true." Arctic ice would have been warmer than the look Nick was giving me. Somewhere in there, betrayal and hopelessness cut at me, making my heart bleed.

"Yes, it's true!" I was furious now, furious that Nick, of all people, would ask me to justify myself, furious that he was so disappointed in me. "And now I have to clean up the mess that Spanish slacker has created. Don't think I enjoy this—"

"Why not? Isn't this what Enforcers live for?" He sat down on the couch, pushing shaky fingers through his hair. "Killing mortals unlucky enough to find out about us?"

"No. That isn't what we do." I slowly walked over to him, then sat down carefully on the coffee table facing him. "Listen to me. Just listen." He was silent, staring at the floor, face set in lines of shock and anger. "It isn't safe for mortals to become part of our lives. For them, or for us. That's why the first law is 'don't get caught'. Do you think your partner's comfortable with her knowledge? Don't you think she'd rather not know?"

"You don't know that. Neither do I. And Tracy can't forget, she can't be hypnotized," challenged Nick, "so what are you going to do?" I looked away, licking my lips as I tried to think of a way to break it to him gently. He laughed softly, without humor. "I don't know you at all," he whispered.

He could have punched me in the stomach, and it would have hurt less. "It *has* to be done—"

"Why? Because of some ancient Code that says their lives are worth less than ours? Tracy's no threat." Nick was up and pacing now, still watching me with disbelief and anger. "She has no proof. She isn't going to go on *Geraldo* or *Hard Copy*—"

"She's a cop, Nick, she knows too much—"

"So am I!"

"That's different!" I shouted him down, hating how difficult this was. "You're one of us!"

"And what happens when I'm not 'one of us' anymore?" He leaned forward, his hands on the back of the sofa, eyes shining with an ugly light. "Will you kill me, too?"

"NO." I stopped, shocked at the volume of the yell that came out of my mouth. "I have to do this."

"Then I have to stop you."

I couldn't help it. I laughed. It was funny, and then the look on his face . . . so I ended up laughing harder, unable to stop until I collapsed in the easy chair. Nick regarded me with a combination of disgust and confusion. Finally, I got my reactions under control. "You can't."

He snarled, eyes going feral. I gasped, unable to believe he was actually trying to challenge me. It seemed to shock him, too. After a second, his eyes were normal again, and an expression of shame washed across his features. Sadness and tiredness replaced the shame as he bowed his head, unable to look at me. "Don't make me have to hurt you, Morgan. I won't kill you, but I can't let you harm Tracy. I'll use the old blood bond to stay in your mind until you give up on this insanity."

Still, he didn't get it. "Nick. You *can't* stop me." I was whispering, trying to deal with the hurt, the anger that he'd choose the side of someone he barely knew over me and the Code. "I am an Enforcer. That means—" I stood, and felt my eyes change, my face change, heard my voice drop "—that I am stronger than you. Faster than you. Smarter than you, in some ways. The bond we once had is for all intents and purposes *gone*, Nick. You can't control me anymore. If I'm killed, the others will know it immediately. And since that is the *only* way you can stop me . . ." I didn't finish the sentence, letting myself return to normal, the adrenaline still pumping through my veins, breath coming faster than usual; all of this disguising the fact that I wanted to cry, to say, *okay, Nick, no problem, I'll just forget about Tracy.* The shaken look on Nick's face as he saw me change had hurt as much as his opposition. I would have loved to let the whole mess go.

But I couldn't. I'd made promises . . . Lacroix's voice came back to me. No excuses here. It was too important.

"Not even for you, Nick."

"So much for owing me 'everything'." The bitterness on his face nearly undid me.

"That's not fair," I said on a soft breath.

"Neither is killing Tracy for something she can't help."

Echoes of my dream. Oh, he was pulling out all the stops. "I might not have to kill her. Vachon doesn't have my resources. There *are* alternatives." I was pleading, hating myself for it, hating him, a little bit, for refusing to understand. Why did he have to be so stubborn?

"Very reassuring." Nick turned away from me. "Get out."

"Nick, it's either me, or the others. If I don't do this, more of them will come—"

"I said GET OUT!" He turned, throwing the cellphone at me, missing by a mile, but that was enough to shut me up when nothing else could. Nick never, ever hurt me. He'd never tried. Not even when I was at my craziest and most dangerous; not even when I deserved it.

Some part of me wanted to blame Lacroix for this; to make it all his fault. But it wasn't his fault, it was Vachon's... No, it was mine. I should have told Nick ... Oh, who knew whose fault it was, it didn't matter, none of it mattered. Why couldn't he understand I didn't have a choice ...?

I grabbed my purse, my shoes and my jacket and headed for the door. Someone was on their way up; the elevator opened as I reached it. A small, slim woman with a cloud of brown hair and big surprised blue eyes hesitantly stepped out of the converted freight car, holding a videocassette and a doctor's bag. "Morgana?" she asked, glancing from me to Nick and back again.

"Yes." I walked past her, banging open the elevator door. "Sorry I can't stay to meet you, whoever you are. I have a pressing engagement elsewhere. Nick—" He didn't look up, didn't even glance at me, and the hurt and anger I'd been nursing increased by another order of magnitude "—when you get over being self-righteous and pig-headed, give me a call. You know I'm right." Silence.

The elevator was at the ground floor before the shakes hit me, nearly sending me to my knees outside in the fading twilight. Rage and pain and frustration and betrayal all combined together. I took off into the sky, letting the anger fuel me as I rose higher and higher, blood tears streaming down my face.

8

Saturday night, after sundown.

I'm not good at leaps of faith.

Taking things at surface value isn't one of my strong points either. It's one of the reasons I've survived as a police officer for as long as I have. It helps in the detective work, and it helps in the politics; knowing that things aren't always as they seem, that people have ulterior motives, that someone who's helping you isn't always your friend.

Vachon asked me to trust him, and to believe his version of events without hearing the other side. To just accept that everything was going to be okay.

Fat chance.

❑❑❑❑❑

Vachon was alone when I entered the belfry. The thought "bats in the belfry" shot through my mind when I saw him hanging from one of the cross-beams, trying to reach something he'd placed out of reach above the door. Then I realized his feet weren't touching the beam; he was floating without support, doing a Peter Pan impression.

"What are you *doing*?" I asked, tilting my head back to see what he was reaching for.

"There's more storage space up here for the music," he replied, not looking down. He was contorted into an upside down C, feet dangling above his head in defiance of gravity in a way that gave me the creeps. I think he does stuff like this on purpose just to jar me. Vachon finished what he was doing, then slowly drifted down to stand in front of me.

"Ready?" he asked, unnaturally serious.

"No."

"Tracy—"

"No, I mean it. I'll do this if there's no other choice, but I *have* to talk to her first. I'm not going through with this if I don't have to." Javier nodded, an I-don't-care-it's-your-skin expression on his face. "Don't give me that look—"

"You don't understand what kind of trouble we're in," he interrupted, turning away to light a few candles, his concentration seeming completely on the matches and tapers. I followed behind him, trying to make him see reason.

"Maybe it's not as bad as you think."

A soft breath on the back of my neck was the only warning. "Maybe it's worse."

I whirled around, drawing my gun, and froze, too scared to shoot. I'd seen Vachon and the Inca when they became vampires. It had scared me, but not so much that I couldn't function. Morgana was worse.

I don't know if it was because her teeth were longer than theirs had been, or the eyes brighter gold; or maybe it was something *wrong* about her face, the muscles and bone structure severely, menacingly altered from what they'd been the evening before. I'd thought her very pretty then, and the worst of it was, she was still beautiful—but beautiful the way animals are beautiful. There was nothing human in her face, and no trace of compassion.

"You told me that the problem was solved, Vachon." The sibilant rasp was different too, but weirdly, the southern accent remained. I took a step backward, shaking.

"I said I had a solution. You don't have to do anything." He was standing next to me, his hand on my arm, and he slowly pushed my arms down, so the gun was pointing at the floor. I'd shot the Inca point blank in the stomach two months ago, and at the time he didn't even blink, just became more of a threat. The words of one of my firing range instructors came back to me: "Never think that because you have a gun, you have control of a situation. Guns can be taken away, and the situation will still persist."

I tried to think of what Nick would do, but I knew Nick would never be in a deserted church with two vampires in the first place. I re-holstered the gun, glancing from Vachon to the woman he called an Enforcer. They were both vampires, but I knew who I trusted without any problem. But first I had to try to talk Morgana out of hurting us.

"Listen, I know you're kind of a cop, or something—"

"That's correct, Detective Vetter." A humorless smile from her made me speak faster, more desperate with each word.

"I understand that we've broken some rules, but it wasn't intentional, and I know it's important that I don't tell. I won't. I promise—"

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Detective." She stepped forward, arrogant, her eyes half-lidded. "You'd have to keep that secret for the rest of your life, you know. And people change. What if you got mad at Javier here? Or he killed someone, and you thought you had to arrest him?" She slowly moved her head back and forth in the negative. "You're asking all of us to trust you. We're not very good at trust."

"How do we know you actually represent who you say you do? I don't know that you have any authority at all."

Vachon shut his eyes, his fingers digging into my arm. "Tracy . . ."

"No." She seemed amused, on the verge of chuckling, but suppressing it. "It's a fair question." She came closer, only an arm's length away, too close for me to feel comfortable. ">>Look at me<<."

I couldn't disobey. I managed to blow off Vachon's commands when he tried to make me forget, but I couldn't *not* look at her. She was still talking. "This is how you know what I am. I have more power. I'm younger than Vachon—centuries younger—but if I wanted to, I could tear off his head and throw it in Lake Ontario before either of you could do anything." She took another step, and I could feel her breath on my cheek, count the extra teeth in her mouth. "Not that it matters. Mortals are not to know about us. I could be anyone, any vampire at all, and no one would question your deaths; they'd be entirely justified. Of course, there are other options . . ."

"No." Vachon put himself between us. "This isn't necessary." He turned around, blocking my view of Morgana, and raised his eyebrows. "Trace?" he whispered, asking for my permission.

The fact that he asked gave me the nerve to nod. "Do it," I said, biting my lower lip, frightened his plan wouldn't work.

He was talking, holding my gaze with his eyes. It was like before, when he'd tried to compel me, but this time, I had to go with it. I couldn't fight it, or we'd both be dead . . .

"Tracy, give your will to me. Let your self go, and just feel. Listen to _*my voice.*_" His lips had quit moving, but the voice was still in my head. _*You're part of me. Your thoughts are mine. Your feelings are mine. Your desires are mine.*_

Some tiny part of me wanted to be sick. Was screaming in outrage at the invasion of my mind. Another part . . .

. . .I could feel his fear, and his desperation; his hope that this ruse would work; the warmth for me, concern that I wouldn't suffer for his carelessness; genuine liking and . . . desire. Like flames on my skin. I wanted to blush, but I didn't have that much will left. I could feel the silk of his shirt, my own skin under his hands; sense him looking at himself through my eyes, hear Morgana behind him with his enhanced hearing. I could feel him experiencing my feelings, and the endless mirroring of our awareness of each other. It was like being drunk, dizzy and warm, and no control at all . . .

*Trace.*

*Vachon? This is so weird.*

*It's not permanent.*

*I know, but—*

*Do you trust me?*

*Yes.* I did. They weren't his emotions, but mine. I could tell the difference again, with that odd reflection, connection to him.

*I don't want this any more than you do.* Vachon's mind was tinged with anger (at Morgana), apology (to me), and fear (of me).

*You're afraid of me?*

*I don't like being this close.*

_*To me?*_ Talk about rejection . . .

*To anyone. I like being alone, at least in my mind.* I could understand that. It was both worse and better than I'd imagined, to have him inside my head. Scarier, more of an invasion; but interesting, and very . . . intense. Slowly, the feeling of him withdrew to the point where he was still present, but I could move again, see again through my own eyes.

I glanced at Morgana, still angry. "Satisfied?" I spit out, and a sense of Vachon's fear came through to me, but didn't stop me from glaring at her.

She was watching him, her head tilted, hands on her hips. "I didn't think you had the guts to go through with it."

"I know the Code." Vachon was cold, and I could feel his dislike of her even though his face was expressionless.

"That doesn't stop some people." She turned to me, looking deep into my eyes. I flinched at something, unsure of what, and sensed Vachon recoil. Morgana grinned and turned away, heading for the exit. She paused at the door, and her face was human, normal; it gave me the shivers, like an episode of *The Twilight Zone* where the alien with the human face was scarier than the one with the bug eyes and antennae. "Oh, and Vachon, don't even think about undoing this."

I wanted to scream, felt Vachon's anger, and barely managed not to deny it out loud. "What are you talking about?" I asked nonchalantly. Or I tried for nonchalance. Somehow I doubt she bought it.

Morgana laughed, sweetly, hand on the door, tapping her toe. "You know *exactly* what I mean, Detective. I'm gonna be in Toronto for a couple years, at least. I'll probably be seein' a lot of you, since you're Nick's partner. If you're not still bound to Vachon at any time durin' that period—" The smile was gone now "—there'll be consequences you won't like." She was glaring at Vachon at the end of this speech, and the fact that her face was still human made it more frightening, the feeling of all that power controlled, unused, the potential for destruction restrained by even more power. "And if you call our mutual friend again—"

"You'll what?" Vachon was smiling now, like a choirboy, and I could feel the amused malice behind it, see it behind his innocent eyes. "Every action has *consequences*, my lady. If you don't like them . . ." He let it trail off, and shrugged, heading over to a chair and sitting down. Morgana's jaw worked, and I could almost see the sparks from her eyes; then she was gone without a sound.

"Well, that was . . . a terrific failure." I collapsed onto the floor, crossing my legs and supporting my head with my hands. "Now what are we going to do?"

"I don't know." He was withdrawing. I could feel it, as well as see it this time. In a way, it was reassuring. I'd been terrified he'd try to control me, but I should have known better. Vachon was too laid back to want to control anyone. But it hurt, too. I could sense his weariness, his wish to be anywhere else, the trapped feelings. "Hopefully, she'll leave soon. I told you there was something else that might get us out of this—"

"Yeah. But it didn't work."

"It still might." Weariness. Liking. Anger. Rejection. Desire.

I'm drowning, I thought, and it was echoed in his mind. I stood up quickly, nearly running for the door. *I can't take this.*

"Trace." I stopped. I could still tell it was my idea, barely. "I'm sorry."

"I know." And I did. I couldn't help it. I didn't want to know; I wanted to forget. He knew that. I could feel his knowledge, his knowledge of what I knew, and on and on . . .

I ran down the stairs, out to the car, trying to put some distance between us, never wanting to see him again, wanting to stay with him forever. For the first time, I knew what it was like to want someone dead, either me or Vachon or Morgana Harte. Not exactly nice, Tracy. I could feel Vachon's amusement at the thought.

I drove to the nearest bar and proceeded to get blind drunk.

9

Saturday evening, 4:15 p.m.

The elevator door slammed shut behind me before I could get more than a glimpse of Morgana. The young woman had shot by me without stopping, throwing angry words over her shoulder at Nick, who was on the couch, still in his pajamas. I had turned back to ask him what was going on and immediately knew that whatever it was, it was bad. The slumped posture and lost look worried me. The last time he had been like that was when Schanke died, and Nick nearly left Toronto because of it. He didn't acknowledge my presence, just kept staring at some dark internal nightmare.

I plastered my best professional demeanor over my anxiety and strolled over to the VCR, popping in the tape I'd brought before turning to Nick. "So, the day didn't go quite like you planned." I sat next to him and turned on the TV with the remote, then took out my stethoscope and blood pressure equipment as the title credits of *The Princess Bride* flickered on the screen.

Nick laughed painfully, and I flinched. "I couldn't have planned this in a million years. This kind of catastrophe takes a sheer act of fate to happen," he said, mechanically sticking out his arm to let me take his almost nonexistent blood pressure. There were two dark blue wineglasses on the coffee table—impossible to tell how much blood he'd had, or if it was all from cows. "The implications of this are just so . . ." His face twisted into a grimace of bitterness. "Ironic," he muttered.

"You know, I'm always torn between feeding you garlic pills or locking you in the trunk of the Caddy when you get like this. Make a fist . . . good. What happened?"

Nick closed his eyes and massaged his forehead with his free hand. His blood pressure was up: way up for a vampire. Either he'd been exercising intensely or just been intensely upset. Suddenly his eyes shot open and he stood up, taking the blood pressure cuff with him over my yell of "Nick! What are you—" as he crossed the room to pick the cellphone up off the floor.

"Tracy," he said to me, expecting me to understand, as usual. I watched in bewilderment as he punched in a phone number with the first sign of animation I'd seen since I got there. The hopeful light in his eyes died as the call went unanswered. "Too late. Damn. Damn . . ." then soft cursing in French as he listlessly dropped the receiver back into the battery charger and sank back onto the couch. I checked his heartbeat against my watch; yup, heart rate up to a beat every eight minutes instead of every ten. More importantly, he seemed even more depressed than before, avoiding my gaze, his face brooding and his blue eyes bleak.

"Talk to me. Now. Why do you look like someone just died?"

"Someone just might have." Nick shook his head at that, agonized denial written all over his face. "No. She wouldn't. I can't believe she'd . . . Not that the alternatives are much better."

"*Nick*." I grabbed his chin and turned his face toward me. "Begin at the beginning. Go on until you get to the end. Then stop. Okay?"

He blinked, then smiled weakly. "I'm not making much sense, am I?"

"No." Although he'd made less sense on a couple occasions I didn't like to remember.

"Morgana—" He stopped talking, distracted, his gaze going to the TV screen, watching the giant scale the cliff, then back to me. "The beginning, right?" At my nod, he stood up, taking the glasses back into the kitchen, then came back into the living room and sat down at the piano. He hit a few random notes and then turned to face me.

"Morgana is an Enforcer. Someone informed on Vachon and Tracy to her. She just left to . . . 'take care' of the problem." His voice was steady, but on his face was an expression of pure pain, the like of which I hadn't seen in two years. Not since the time Nick thought he'd killed his master, Lacroix.

"Why didn't you stop her?" I asked, standing and looking around wildly. "Tracy—"

"Isn't home. And if I interfere in this . . ." Nick played a few notes, the ominous opening to Beethoven's Fifth. "I'll just make it worse, Nat. Tracy doesn't know about me. Right now the only thing saving her is how little she *does* know. Morgana won't kill her—" he seemed to be talking to himself again "—I'm sure of that. Maybe I can make her see reason in a few days, change her mind . . ."

"What *will* she do to your partner?" I asked, walking over to the piano and joining him on the bench, picking out a few high notes of my own.

"Probably . . ." My patient seemed nauseous, but not from any physical cause. "Force Vachon to make her a thrall. Or bring her over."

"And we're just sitting here? I can't believe this—"

"She said the only way to stop her would be to kill her," Nick whispered. "I can't understand . . . You think you've done something good," he stated, folding his hands on top of the piano, staring straight ahead. "Something human. Then it blows up in your face like a bottle-rocket."

"Nick, will you stop brooding and tell me why this matters? There has to be a way to fix it," I said, slamming my hand down on the keyboard, a discordant chime sounding as I did so.

"No," he replied in a distant voice. "Morgana also pointed out that interference would bring more Enforcers. I'm fairly certain she wasn't lying. We're just going to have to pray that she's the same woman I used to know." A wealth of sadness lay underneath his words. I tried to make sense of what he'd said about Morgana so far, and Lacroix's mocking dedication came back to me. 'To love with all one's heart. To hate with all one's soul . . . One can only envy such . . . simplicity.' Not a description that would fit someone who could be talked out of any course of action.

"She wasn't an Enforcer back then, was she?"

"No." Nick started to play *Chopsticks*, then stopped. "She was a mistake. Someone else's mistake, that I thought I could fix. If I had let the Enforcers have *her* then, we wouldn't have this mess now."

"You said someone informed on Vachon . . ." Nick raised an eyebrow as I continued, "I hope, I really hope, you're not blaming yourself for this. You had nothing to do with your partner finding out about Vachon. And there was no way you could have warned them if you didn't know what she'd become." Nick on one of his guilt trips can rack up more frequent flier miles than an airline pilot. What he was saying was terrifying me, but I wasn't going to let either of us become paralyzed by the position we were in. If there was a way to get Tracy out of his ex-friend's clutches, we were going to have to stay calm to find it. Which brought up another point. "What's a thrall?"

"A slave." A slow, soft jazz melody started flowing from his fingers. "A mortal subservient to a vampire's will. Like Renfield, in *Dracula.*" His smile was full of self-mockery. "You'd make a better Renfield than—" He missed a note, then kept playing, his voice strained. "It doesn't have to be permanent. Vachon called before you came over, to tell me what Morgana was and what she had planned for them, and mentioned trying to fake her out. I don't think it'll work, but . . ." Nick shrugged. "I'll have to talk her out of this. Or . . . try to kill her."

I swallowed, then forced myself to ask. "Do you think you can do that?"

Nick shook his head, a bittersweet smile on his face. "I tried to scare her, Nat. I never, ever did that to her before. I was always so proud of myself for that, for not being like Lacroix . . . And she turned right around and snarled back, and her face was a stranger's." He stopped playing, rubbing his face in exhaustion. "No, that's not true. That was the horrible thing. She was back to what she had been . . ."

"And that was?" I asked softly. The memory of it had brought another shadow of regret to his face.

"Feral. Savage." In the background, I could hear the princess in the movie saying "And you can die too for all I care!" Nick's eyes were closed, and he was talking in a slow, dreamy voice. "I thought I saved her. It must not have been enough, for her to become an Enforcer like this." Opening his eyes, he went on, watching scenes I couldn't see. "She killed her master. Drained him of his blood when he brought her over. It doesn't happen very often—most vampires have better control of their creations. I think it was too much power and too many memories for her be able to cope. At the time, Lacroix said that most would have died when their master died." He focused on me, and gave me the barest hint of a smile. "But she was too strong. Too angry. She lived."

"But she wasn't . . . sane?"

Nick nodded, and stood up from the piano, wandering over to a tapestry on the wall with a sun disk on it, fiddling with the hanging, purposely not looking at me. He didn't think I would approve of whatever he was about to tell me: he starts fidgeting whenever he wants to avoid a subject.

"Morgana killed six people in Houston. Two of them were other vampires. She drained them of blood and then broke their necks."

"Good . . . God." I was staring at him, trying to imagine a vampire that crazed, wondering how she got away with it. Then I remembered: she wouldn't have gotten away with it. "How did you square that with the Enforcers? And why didn't the police find out?"

"I offered her my blood, bonded with her. If an older vampire does that for someone who is masterless and young, they usually become the older vampire's fledgling." I was trying to absorb the implications when he spelled them out for me. "I was her foster parent. I took responsibility for her, guaranteeing to the Enforcers that she wouldn't be a threat to the Community. I took her to Venice, got Janette to help me train her, and kept the others from killing her since, technically, she wasn't a problem anymore. The Houston police thought it was a Texas Ripper copy-cat killer."

Nick turned around, face full of the need to make me understand, his words coming faster. "It wasn't her fault, Nat. Morgana didn't want to become a vampire, she was forced into it, and when she came back, she retaliated the only way she could, by killing her killer. And then she couldn't stop killing . . ." He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "With me in control, she managed to keep it in check. All that rage and the bloodlust with it. We thought she was fine, that she'd made the transition . . ."

I was silent for a couple minutes after he finished talking, trying to think of something to say, knowing it wouldn't be adequate. "It's not your fault," was all I could whisper. "All of this isn't because of you."

"You don't think so?" Nick chuckled hollowly, his head bowed.

"No." I said this with more force, determined to make it true, make Nick see it. "You did Morgana a favor, a long time ago. More than anyone could have asked of you. She may be too ungrateful to see that, but I'm not. And I'm not cutting her any slack now because you feel like you failed her. We have to stop her."

Nick's head snapped up. "'We' aren't doing anything." I opened my mouth to protest, but he overrode me. "If she's being hard on Tracy, how do you think she'd treat you? You know more than Tracy does, about vampires, our lives, our names—Morgana wouldn't just make you a thrall, she'd bring you over. And . . ." He let out a breath, the guilt plain to see. "I don't know if I'd be able to stop her." He was quiet for a second, then met my eyes. "We're going to have to stop the treatments. You can't afford to be seen with me."

"Is that you talking, or Morgana?" I folded my arms over my chest, my jaw starting to clench. Bad enough that Morgana was hurting Tracy Vetter, who had never hurt anyone, certainly not Vachon or Nick. I don't like being dictated to, something Nick tends to forget. If abandoning the research was the Enforcer's idea, that seemed like an even better reason to continue it.

"Me. Natalie, don't you see that if she figures out what you know, you'll be in danger—" Anxiety had brought Nick's voice down another octave, and I stifled the selfish little spark that was happy he would worry about me. *Now* wasn't the time for that. But I couldn't help being glad that he cared so much; Nick leaves a lot unsaid, preferring gestures and actions to words.

"I knew this job was dangerous when I took it." I was furious, but if I let Nick see it, he'd only get more stubborn. "And you're not getting out of the blood tests that easy. She's already seen me. We can tell her I'm working on your skin disorder, and she'll assume I don't know anything more. If we have to tell her anything."

"Maybe we won't have to. I doubt Morgana will be calling me anytime soon." The bitterness was back, although Nick managed a half-hearted smile of relief at his own words—his fears for my safety temporarily eased, I thought.

"Good. That'll give us time to come up with a plan." I couldn't help but wonder what had happened with Tracy, but that gave rise to thoughts of what might happen to me if the Enforcers found out what we'd been doing for the last four years, so I cut off that train of thought as quickly as I could. Except . . . maybe there was a way around that too . . . "Plenty of time to deal with it tomorrow."

"Thanks, Scarlett." Nick grinned, and I smiled back, glad he was almost back to his normal self.

"Anytime, Rhett."

10

Wishes come true, but not free and (I can't remember where I heard this phrase) some gifts demand sacrifices.

For revenge against my killer, I turned my back on Heaven. Not forever, I told myself; just until after the man who killed me, killed my friends, *hurt* me . . . was dead. Then I'd let myself die.

For my success, I lost my mind. Misplaced it? Yes, that's right, I put it somewhere and then I just couldn't find it again. Elliot gave me his blood when I came back to control me. To get my memories, to give me his thoughts—and I drank it all. I drank until I thought I'd melt from the fire in it. I felt him die, and I rejoiced at his struggles, screaming out curses at him as he dissolved back to dust at my feet. I tried to remember at that instant why I was so happy, and so angry at the same time. I couldn't. I just liked the feeling.

I was a graduate student at Rice University. I had parents who loved me, a boyfriend who was more good than not, a younger brother I adored, and friends who counted on me. I was supposed to go to Italy in three months, I had four payments left on my student loan, and a fairly bright future as a historian.

I traded all of it in for a pair of fangs and the death of a monster.

Then I became one.

❑❑❑❑❑

Saturday night, 7 p.m.

I returned to my apartment feeling angry, satisfied, relieved, frightened—overwhelmed. The decision to force Tracy Vetter's enthrallment hadn't been easy, but it had been the only one I could live with. Nick would understand, eventually. He had to.

Unhappily, I knew he didn't *have* to anything. Most of us would say he had to respect and (to a certain extent) obey Lacroix. That hadn't stopped him from hating Lucien for the last few centuries, or deterred him from looking for a cure for being a vampire. If he decided I belonged in the same category . . . The thought hurt too much to contemplate. Nick saved half my soul.

The Enforcers saved the other half.

I landed on the roof, thinking of my recent interview with Vachon and Detective Vetter. It hadn't been what any of us expected. They'd hoped to deceive me with a makeshift bond, something to be broken when I wasn't looking, and I'd enlightened them as to how difficult that would be. I'd thought that Tracy Vetter would be the usual glamour-struck mortal half-enchanted with a vampire. What little I'd barely remembered of Vachon from Texas hadn't given me any reason to doubt it. But they weren't the usual pairing; more like friends, or equals. Maybe they'd thank me later.

Remembering the open dislike in Vachon's eyes, and Tracy's hidden fury, it seemed unlikely. Slowly, I sat down on the edge of the roof, letting my mind relax, focusing on Lake Ontario, the moon, and the night. The rest of the Enforcers needed to know what I'd done.

It happened as it always does: like I'd opened a chamber in my own mind, and they were suddenly there. In a sense they always were: that's the price of being an Enforcer. You are never, ever, truly alone, but you are always isolated from other vampires. In my case, that's what keeps me from becoming what I was thirty years ago, and again ten years ago.

Child.

My family. There are always at least one hundred Enforcers; never more than a thousand. I can't differentiate very well—yet—between one individual presence and another when I contact them. It doesn't matter. I can recognize the flavor of who is present, and who is not, even if I can't put names or faces to any save a dozen of them. More of us, and we'd risk becoming rulers; fewer, and we wouldn't be able to restrain the other vampires. **I have news.*

Quickly, I let them see the events of the last few days. Silence, for a moment, then cacophony, until a single voice dominated the chorus. **You have done well. But you should have told us before you took action.**

Thank you. I'm sorry, it seemed too important—

Nevertheless. It was almost kind, that voice; stronger now, with others in agreement with it. **We are always here. It would have been but a moment's work to contact us.**

I was silent. They knew why, and the chorus became condemning, scolding. **You should not be afraid of us. We are a part of you. We can not force you to do anything you do not truly wish to do.**

I know.

Then why?

Nick. I opened my eyes, sadness washing through me, returned by them, then I controlled myself. **I was afraid of what you would say, or order me to do. I wanted to protect him. I wanted to be . . . merciful, to Vachon.**

One part of the choir was thrumming with anger, a single, low bass note of bloodthirst. **You should have killed them, but it's too late now.**

I knew that one. He was an Enforcer for the same reasons I was: he couldn't be trusted alone. For him, blood is a constant need, a thirst that never fades, an intolerable fire. He needs us to take the edge away, to keep him in check. There's another presence—a female one—that I've felt sometimes; cold cruel brutality, and urges I don't understand. She's kept on the same chain as the other, the same chain that holds me, the links that bind all the Enforcers, make us more than other vampires. My rage is like her icy malice, and the first one's thirst—I can't rein it in. Nick could, for a while, until we all thought it was gone.

But it's part of me, not just part of being a vampire. It's why I killed Elliot in the first place, why I make such a good Enforcer. I'm not like Nick. I'm not that strong.

Enough. The majority suppressed the hungry one, then returned its attention to me. **Your loyalty to Nicholas is admirable, but misplaced. He is no longer part of your family. The bonds between you are very weak, disused. You owe him nothing now.**

Yes.

Nothing. His sense of morals is extraneous.

You are part of us.

I know, I whispered, feeling the unshed tears. **But he tried. He was kind to me. He found a way out for me.**

It was not enough. You do not have to live by his rules.

I was silent, not disagreeing, but not replying. It was my fault it hadn't been enough, not Nick's. Not all Enforcers are like me, or the hungry one, or the sadistic female. Many are so old I can't comprehend their logic, others are naturally stronger than average, still others can get inside your mind and stay there without you noticing it. Some of them volunteered, some of them were drafted. But all of us hold to the Code. To protect the Community. To serve their best interests. To use whatever means necessary to preserve our species.

What Nick did was outside the boundaries of what Enforcers do to rogues. He risked his own mind and life by taking me on as a fledgling. Enforcers have no loyalties, save to each other. They don't have children. If it hadn't been for him, they would have killed me after I murdered all those people when I was first turned. It was an act of mercy on his part.

If it hadn't been for the Enforcers, I wouldn't have gotten a second chance twenty years later, when I barely had enough control to beg them to kill me before I murdered again. Nick couldn't have stopped me then, I was too strong . . . I guess it balances out. But it wasn't due to mercy, but pragmatism. They need young ones every once in a while, and I was convenient.

It is concluded. You have done well, and have also done so in not attacking or further antagonizing Lacroix. Approval from a cool distant flute. **You progress.**

Thank you.

Inform us of further developments. And then they were gone.

I gulped night air, feeling slightly sick, as I always do. Thirsty, oh, so thirsty. I wanted to feed, to run down some mugger or rapist, to sink my fangs into their flesh. The rage I always feel at what was done to me, at what I am, inflaming me to hurt someone, to kill—

—and the controls snapped in place, the hard-learned, drummed-in lessons from the Others; that, and my own sense of shame. Not at being an Enforcer, not at being a vampire. No. The shame comes from having chosen to become one, from needing others to help control my rages. If you're going to be a vampire, you should be strong, in control, frightening, masterful.

I can't even master myself.

11

Sunday afternoon, 4:12 p.m.

The room spun sickeningly when I opened my eyes. Groaning, I closed them, and wished I hadn't mixed tequila and vodka. Wished I hadn't gotten drunk at all. Too late for that . . . Too late for a lot of things.

No matter what, I never drink so much that I can't remember what I was doing before I started. Every detail of Saturday night came back to me in all its vicious clarity. Morgana's smile, Vachon's withdrawal, my flight to the bars—I hadn't done anything this stupid since my first week in blues. No, this had definitely been stupider. Meeting Vachon in the first place had been weirder, but that wasn't anything I could have stopped. The nightstand clock read 4:13. It was possible that he was awake by now. But did I *want* to talk to him?

Something else was bothering me. I tried to pin it down, but the nausea kept interfering. I got out of bed carefully, holding my head as steady as possible, and made my way into the kitchen.

Several glasses of water and a handful of aspirin later, I sat at the table, watching the waning sun, and thought over the previous evening. Where had it all gone wrong? Before the Enforcer showed up, it seemed like a decent plan. Unpleasant, okay, really unpleasant, but workable. Let Vachon "enthrall" me, then end it after she left. Why hadn't he guessed it might not work?

A feeling of sadness suddenly hit me, and for a second I was disoriented. Then I realized why—it wasn't me. It was Vachon. *That* was what had been bothering me. The awareness of him was *there* right behind my eyes. A sense of presence, of knowing what he was thinking, of—

I wanted to scream. I *hated* it. I hate being out of control, I hate feeling stupid, I—it was gone.

The feelings were gone. The presence was still there, I could still reach toward him, but the emotional content was muted, hard to detect. Gritting my teeth, I reached for the phone and punched in his number. I started speaking the instant he picked up. "Don't do that."

"Get used to it, Trace. We're stuck with it for now." Vachon's voice was as matter-of-fact as ever, but the regret and depression I'd sensed were stronger when he spoke. Odd. Two different messages, coming in at the same time—hard to know which was most important. I concentrated on ignoring the telepathy/mind sharing/thralldom-whatever-it-was.

"That doesn't mean we have to use it. Turn it off! I don't want to know what you're thinking!"

Amusement, both through the bond and in his voice. "Funny, I thought you were so curious. Just think, you could get all your questions answered and know whether or not I was lying. I'm surprised you don't want to take advantage of this."

"How did she figure out what we were going to do?"

Vachon was quiet, regret bleeding through again despite my efforts to block it. "I underestimated her."

"Great."

"Well, how was I supposed to know? It's not like I've spent a lot of time with Enforcers." The defensiveness in his voice was echoed by a mental spark of annoyance. "When she came by Friday night she was totally in Enforcer mode. I thought she'd be some stupid brute we could finesse. I was wrong. Okay? I was wrong. Sue me."

"How could you *not* know, Vachon? What, are these . . . Enforcers so mysterious that no one has a clue how they act? That's pretty unbelievable." I could feel the mental jarring of my disbelief being thrown back at me, with Vachon's irritation wrapped around it. I took a deep breath, held it, and managed to regain my equilibrium. "Will you *quit* that?"

"You quit it! I'm not enjoying this any more than you are! I thought . . ." He cut off what he was going to say, and the intensity of the conversation dropped several notches. "Look. I've never had a thrall before for a good reason. All of this is a little too much for me to handle. I am *not* going to direct your thoughts, or control you, but you've got to do me a favor and not *think* at me so loud. Okay?"

"Okay." I simmered quietly, wrestling with myself, feeling him watch me, then swallowed back several things I could have said, and settled for, "Enforcers. What do you know about them?"

Vachon sighed. "What everyone knows. They're bad news. They only show up when someone's violated the Code. You can't fight them and expect to win, but they'll go away if there's no problem."

"So the fact that she's staying in Toronto is just our bad luck."

"Yes." He seemed calmer, maybe because I was also cooling down.

"I have to warn Nick about her."

"NO." Panic flared, along with fear, and the wish to prevent . . . what? The link was throttled down again, but I could feel Vachon's agitation clearly. "Don't do that. Very bad idea, Tracy. Do you want Nick to be in the same position we are?"

"No." He was hiding something, but I couldn't figure out what. "Look . . . I know you said he was safe from her, but how can you be sure?"

"She's an Enforcer. It's part of the Code. She won't draw attention to herself, to the rest of the Community. That's why we're in trouble. You're a cop, and they don't trust you unless they think they can control you. She won't want Nick to know that she's one of us if she cares about him at all, and she must, otherwise . . ." He let the thought trail off, and the taste of a lie in his mind was very faint, but still there. Too faint to call him on, though.

"'They.' 'One of us.' 'Community.' You ever notice we never say the word vampire?" I asked, getting angry again. "She's a vampire. You're a vampire. They are *vampires.* I am under the mind control of a vampire."

"I don't have any problem with the word. You're the one who never gets past the first syllable," Vachon said, sounding like he was suppressing a laugh. Then his voice quieted, and the intensity in his mind came back. "But you're not under my control. I promise. You're as free as you ever were. I wouldn't do that to you."

This was truth again; and my mind backed up what the telepathy was telling me. Vachon hated being controlled too much to do it to someone else. He might not be the most responsible, dependable person in the universe, but manipulating people wasn't one of his problems. That was one of the things I liked about him.

Suddenly the intimacy of the feelings was too strong. The liking/respect/desire to protect/straight desire washed over me, and I wasn't sure who was who for a second, until the emotions were cut off, making me dizzy, wondering how much he saw in my mind, wondering what was *in* my mind. Fear inspired anger, which led me back to my first question. "We have to do something about this. I can't work or just go on with my life if this is going to keep happening."

"Something like . . .?"

"I'm asking you, Vachon."

Silence. Except silence was never just silence now. Reluctance, resignation— "*No.* There has to be something we can do, Javier. I won't accept this."

"It'll be worse if you don't, Tracy. I'm not saying this is permanent. There might still be a way around it, but this could take . . . a while."

What was "a while" to a vampire? A few years? A few decades? There was no framework surrounding his sense of time that I could detect—a while might be most of my life. It hit me then, how alien he was. Up until now, the sheer unbelievability of the situation had preoccupied me; but with the thought of his time sense, and his age, a million other thoughts occurred. Vachon drank blood. He'd killed people, many of them, over a long period of time. We might be friends—I didn't care to classify what else we might be—but he wasn't normal, he didn't . . .

The distance between us increased again, and I took a deep breath. There was so much I didn't know about him, and now I was stuck in a position closer and more completely involved than any kind of sex act could ever make us. If I wanted to stay friends with him—if I wanted to get out of this—I'd have to remember that whatever else he might be, he could feel what I felt. And he had emotions, too. I'd sensed them, and they weren't *that* different from mine, or from what I'd guessed his would be. The feeling of age, and the cynicism, were deeper and more ingrained than I'd imagined, but he wasn't a monster any more than I was.

"I apologize . . . I panicked for a second." I paused, then went on, "We have to get some things clear, and make plans. But I need some distance from this. Maybe we can meet later this week, try to brainstorm for options. Until then, I don't want to be in your mind, or have you in mine."

"Fine with me." But he was annoyed. Irritated. And just a little guilty.

"This isn't your fault."

After a second, he realized that I'd picked up on his emotions again. "This is going to be a real pain in the ass is what it's going to be. Now I wish I'd been the one to get drunk."

"Uh . . . sorry about that." I wanted to laugh. The image of Vachon getting loaded second-hand struck me as funny, maybe because he's always seemed "too cool" to unbend enough to knock back a few beers.

"Yeah, yeah. Later, Detective. And don't mention this to your partner!" He hung up, but I could still feel him there, in the back of my head, and it wasn't funny anymore.

Resolutely, I went back upstairs to change, determined not to think of vampires. Or thralls. Or my partner.

Sort of like trying not to think of a pink elephant.

12

Monday evening, 8:15 p.m.

Every time this happens, I find out what a good liar I am.

"I'll have the cause of death for you after I've done some tests," I glibly told Captain Reese over the phone. "Right now, I'd say it's a straightforward stabbing, but

I have to be sure. I doubt the victim was killed at the scene, if that's any help. There's too much blood missing." For once, this was true, but it wasn't the missing blood that had suggested it. Not that the captain was going to be told that.

"Well, get us what you can, Dr. Lambert. The Crown Prosecutor is screaming for an arrest. The victim's husband is some high mucky-muck on the City Council. Right now Commissioner Vetter is ready to promise their office anything if they'll just keep the press off our backs."

"Okay. I'll tell Nick when I have something." I hung up the phone and for the thousandth time counted myself lucky that Nick usually got the weird cases. Having to work around another homicide detective's case to give him information on a vampire victim would have added another wonderful dimension of subterfuge to the whole exercise, and I was having a difficult time dealing with the recurring situation as it was. Medical ethics kept having to take precedence over everything else. I may be an M.E., not an M.D., but I took the same oath as any other physician. I swore that first, I would do no harm; I swore to preserve life in all its forms; I swore to turn aside from any action or inaction which would allow anyone's life to depart untimely.

If I told the whole truth about Nora Quentin's death, a lot of people's lives might depart untimely.

Tracy Vetter walked into the morgue, her partner right behind her. I wasn't sure what I'd expected to see in her face. From what Nick had told me, her bond to Vachon wasn't likely to be entirely pleasant. But she seemed fine, her face showing no signs of undue stress. I glanced at Nick, raising my eyebrows. He shook his head, face closed and impassive. Tracy's facade wasn't good enough to fool Nick, but the fact that she still didn't know about him kept him from offering her any help.

I started to talk as soon as they were both in the room. "Time of death fixed at 3 a.m.; a lot of alcohol in her system; signs of recent sexual activity . . . and a slit throat, as well as other contusions and bruises." I rolled my eyes when Tracy wasn't looking and Nick grimaced in apology. How many more times was I going to have to do this? I wondered. I glanced at Nick's partner, and pulled back the sheet.

Mrs. Quentin *did* have a severed jugular vein, but that was done after her death. And it didn't completely disguise the puncture wounds below and behind her ear. Tracy would know what had happened, just as I had, just as Nick did. If recent events hadn't made issues of trust even more difficult, I might have demanded that Nick tell her what he was right then. Lying to her, and trying to disguise my own knowledge, just wasn't worth the effort anymore.

"Mrs. Quentin was moved after her death. I just got the results from forensics, and they confirm what I found on the body. Definite signs of post-mortem trauma. I'd say someone took her to the hotel room where she was found about an hour after she died."

"Are you sure about that?" Tracy asked, not looking at me, staring in fascination at the cadaver's neck.

"Positive. Any leads yet?" I gave Nick the autopsy report. The signs of strain that Tracy wasn't manifesting were blatantly obvious on him. "Are you okay?" I asked in a low voice, hoping Tracy wouldn't overhear.

"Fine," he said quietly, glancing at the other detective. then added, "Mrs. Quentin was seen leaving a very large Halloween party at around midnight with a young man who, in retrospect, the hosts realized they didn't know. A party-crasher. We've got a description. Hopefully we'll be able to get a lead from someone else who may have seen him and picked up on something."

"Great." False congratulations for something which didn't make either detective happy. "Maybe this'll be easy."

Tracy abruptly spoke up. "Nick, I'm going to follow up on an idea I have. I'll catch up to you tomorrow, when we interrogate the husband, all right?" She was already out the door, not waiting for Nick's okay.

I waited until I was certain she was gone. "How are things, really?"

"Lousy." Nick rubbed his temples, then forced a wry smile. "I want to help Tracy, Nat. It's so obvious what's happened to her—anyone of our kind who runs across her will know it in a heartbeat. It's eating away at her inside." He dropped his hands, eyes going distant and hard. "Morgana has a lot to answer for."

"Have you called her?" Nick shook his head impatiently. "Nick, you've got to. I know you're angry, but if you talk to her, maybe she'll change her mind about Tracy. You can't lose your temper with her again."

"No. This—" he gestured at the corpse on the table "—makes it even more difficult. Morgana will think she has to do something about it, and while I despise those of us who still kill, her involvement would make any kind of police investigation impossible! Keeping all these secrets from Tracy and the captain is bad enough without adding an Enforcer to the mix."

"While we're on the subject of your partner," I said, pulling the sheet back across Mrs. Quentin's face, "how are you going to keep her out of the line of fire with a vampire murderer to find?"

"The way I always do," Nick said, walking toward the door. "Draw the fire in my direction."

"Nick!" Angry vampires going after Nick . . . I had a sudden flash of *him* on my autopsy table again, but this time he'd stay dead. I shuddered.

"I can handle it, Nat . . ." He stopped at the door, and gave me a weary smile. "And, at least, Tracy is safer than she was before. Vachon will know if anything happens to her. But dammit, why did this have to happen now?"

I stared down at Mrs. Quentin, and repeated the Hippocratic Oath to myself again, as justification and reminder: first, I will do no harm. I will preserve life. I will do nothing to make life depart untimely.

There's nothing in the Oath that says you shouldn't lie through your teeth to protect life. But it doesn't say how you're supposed to deal with the consequences. Or how they make you feel.

13

Monday evening, 8:40 p.m.

I'd needed to distract myself. I'd considered various forms of mayhem like judicious murder, property dismemberment, and racquetball, and finally done something really self-destructive. I went to the Raven.

Brianna grabbed me two seconds after I got on the dance floor. "Morgana! I heard you were in town! Where the hell've you been?" she demanded, her voice raised to compete with the music. Her close-cropped black hair, coffee-and-cream skin and huge dark eyes hadn't changed. Neither had the insouciant, don't-give-a-damn attitude. The clothes were different from those in New Orleans, but were still cutting edge without being trendy, exposing more flesh than they covered. Janette's teaching. *How to Make Men Pant for More Without Being Trashy*, chapter 6.

"Denver! Can we get a table? I can barely hear myself think!" I yelled back as we snaked our way through the crowd to the edges of the main room. The flashing lights and booming music were just what I needed to forget my troubles with Nick. We finally found a space after Brianna glared some neophytes out of a corner booth. I noticed a couple other familiar faces, a few from New Orleans, a couple from Venice . . . No Alma, though. She had probably followed Janette wherever she had gone when she left Toronto. "Where's Miklos?"

"Extended party weekend with his latest dish." Brianna smiled wickedly. "You know our man. Never alone for long."

I grinned and signaled the bartender for a drink, scanning the room as I did so. "Lacroix's not here tonight?"

"He's got some CERK publicity thing. Can't say I'm sorry. He's a real bitch to work for. Doesn't believe in breaks, and he always wants to tell me how to dress." She frowned. "You aren't looking to start something with him, are you?"

"Why does everyone ask me that?"

"'Cause some of us remember New Orleans . . . and Venice . . . and—"

"Okay, okay." Our drinks arrived, and I gratefully swallowed down a tingling mouthful of the house special. "Forget I said that. No. I'm being good. Really."

"Like Ni-cho-la?" the New Yorker drawled, face full of mischief.

"Brianna . . ." I growled.

"Cut it out, Morgan." Brianna sipped her drink, eyes cynical and knowing. She's one of the few people besides Nick and Janette who call me that. One of the few real friends I have. "You and I both know he's half-crazy with his damn Grail quest. Should've given up on that idea a long time ago . . ."

"Maybe, but that's not—" I stopped speaking, my attention drawn to the bar by the sight of a familiar blonde head. "What's she doing here?" I asked aloud in my surprise. As if my voice had managed to penetrate the raucous melodies filling the bar, Tracy Vetter suddenly turned and headed straight for me.

"We have to talk," the detective said when she reached our table, ignoring Brianna completely.

"Go away, Detective. We don't have anything to discuss." I glanced at Bri, whose puzzled expression confirmed that she recognized Tracy but had no idea why the woman would want to talk to me. "I'm having a nice evening out—"

"Some *friend* of yours had a nice evening out Saturday night, and now there's a dead body in the morgue with a matched pair of puncture marks," Tracy said, interrupting.

I shrugged, smiled at Brianna, said, "This will only take a minute," then dragged Tracy into the back room. Fortunately, no one was using it at the moment, although the smell of fresh blood permeated the air, making me sorry I hadn't remembered to grab my drink. "Are you insane? Or just stupid? Making accusations like that *here* of all places—"

"Why? Aren't I safe now that I'm under Vachon's 'protection'?" Detective Vetter snapped back at me, hands on her hips. "There's a corpse in the morgue who was obviously killed by one of *your* people. That makes it your responsibility. You wanted me to cooperate? Fine. I'm dumping this mess back in your lap."

"Don't take that tone with me."

I don't know what she saw in my face, but whatever it was muted her hostility down to a manageable level. "You say you're an Enforcer—" I glanced around, hoping like hell no one was eavesdropping "—and that you're supposed to keep *them* from breaking the rules. I can't arrest a vampire for murder! I'm not even sure I can find whoever did this! And I'm not putting my partner—your friend Nick, remember him?—in a situation where I can't tell him we're pursuing a mythical monster. So you'd better find out who did this. Or else . . ."

"Or else what?"

"I'll have to tell Nick everything."

Narrowing my eyes, I said softly, "You'd do that to him? Put him in that much danger from us?"

"He's already in danger! Or do vampire murderers just wound cops who are trying to investigate their homicides, instead of making meals out of them?" she asked, crossing her arms.

I clenched my jaw. This was getting too complicated. Maybe telling her Nick was a vampire wouldn't be such a bad thing—except Nick wouldn't forgive me soon, and it would only increase Tracy Vetter's knowledge of the Community. Not a good idea. While I was contemplating this, Tracy was squinting at me suspiciously, her deceptively pretty blue eyes studying my face. "Why are you so reluctant to catch this guy? He's putting the rest of you in jeopardy, it's your job to stop him, right?"

"Of course," I said acidly.

"So? What are you going to do?"

"I'll take care of it, Detective."

"You'll stop him, right? Execute him, stop him from doing this again?"

I glanced away, then back at the other woman. "Killing a mortal is only punishable by death if you get caught. I'll make sure no more murders happen in Toronto, and that the vampire . . . gets help."

Tracy swallowed, a queasy expression on her face, mingled anger and disgust. "That's all you'll do if I leave it to you. Cover it up. He'll get away with it. You kill people and manipulate them and bully them—"

"Your protection doesn't extend to verbal abuse of me," I hissed. Hearing her echo my worst opinions of myself was not pleasant. "I'd be very careful, Tracy Vetter. You're already on thin ice."

"Is that a threat?" Brave. She was definitely brave. But not at all wise. Not if she was thinking of going after a vampire on her own. Not that Vachon would let her, of course. Or Nick, for that matter.

"No." I calmed down. "It's the truth. The others won't touch you now that you're obviously Vachon's." Tracy's face screwed up in an expression of nausea. "But that doesn't mean they can't make your life hell in other ways, Detective. Take my advice. Keep a low profile, don't come back here, and leave this to me."

"How can I trust you?" Tracy asked.

"I'm not going to answer that." I walked toward the door. "I suggest you use the back exit. If anyone sees you with me, it'll just make my job harder."

"Why?"

I felt sorry for her, almost. She was so out of her depth. Vachon wasn't doing a very good job of helping her adjust to her new state, or telling her things she should know. Then again, he probably didn't know the answer to her question, either.

"Because, Detective, none of those people out there know I'm an Enforcer. Just you and Vachon, and if the murder occurred Saturday night, then I suppose Vachon has an alibi in you, doesn't he?" At her stunned stare I added, "Don't tell anyone. It wouldn't be smart, or healthy, and I'd have to ask Javier to keep you on a shorter leash. It's better this way. Our perpetrator won't know I'm coming for him until it's too late. Have our mutual friend bring me the police files and any necessary evidence, and I'll track our killer."

"And give him a passport out of town." The detective glared at me, anger still evident. "Pretty wimpy punishment."

"Don't judge what you don't understand."

"Oh, I understand. We're just cattle; and you don't want to panic the herd. But you're not going to kill the wolf. It's his nature to attack the cows, right? It doesn't matter to you how they feel about being eaten." She stalked out of the room on this remark, knowing a good exit line when she said it.

I sat down and put my head in my hands. I could have told her the truth: that I remembered being prey too vividly to ever side with the predator's arguments. I could have told her that it might not be the vampire's fault—*the same way it wasn't your fault?* my mind mocked me. I could have told her I didn't have a choice, that policy was policy, and that she was only angry with me because this was her homicide case and it would go down on the books as unsolved. I could have told her that just because the murderer would live didn't necessarily mean he would enjoy it.

I could have said a lot. But not to her, a mortal and a cop. I wanted . . . I wanted to talk to Nick so badly it was a physical hurt. Or Janette. Or even Brianna.

But Brianna didn't know I was an Enforcer, and might not have stayed my friend if she knew; and Janette was gone; and Nick wasn't speaking to me. Which left me alone, again. All Enforcers are alone, in the end. No matter how many of us are in each other's minds, we're still separate, disconnected by our natures. If we were good at sharing, we wouldn't be Enforcers. We wouldn't be able to kill other vampires so easily.

"Self-pity is such an ugly emotion." Lacroix stood in the doorway, my glass in his hand. He held it out to me, and I took it from him carefully. "It doesn't suit Nicholas. And I might add that it doesn't do much for your looks either."

"I didn't ask your opinion," I said, sipping slowly despite my thirst. "Did you need something? I thought you weren't going to be here this evening."

"Fortunately, while I have to maintain work obligations for the sake of my hobby as the Nightcrawler, I'm allowed a certain amount of artistic temperament. I walked out of the party. Quite enjoyable, since they don't dare fire me. I'm far too popular with the alien insomniac audience." Lacroix's eyes sparkled with self-satisfied glee.

It was just too tempting. I had to do it; I had to put a damper on his evening. Mine was already ruined, why should he still be enjoying himself? "Someone got sloppy and had a meal end up in the morgue with recognizable bite marks tonight."

"Oh, dear." The glee dimmed, and Lacroix's brows came down in an expression of distaste. "Shop talk. How boring. No wonder you're sunk in apathy. The prospect of work, no doubt."

"No doubt."

"And of clashing with Nicholas about it."

My fingers clenched around the glass. "There won't be any clash. Nick knows better than to interfere. He certainly won't arrest one of us."

"No. But will he let you cope with it, I wonder? Or will he play hero again, if that's necessary, and offer to help the poor, misguided murderer? Then again, perhaps he'll just kill one of the Community for the sake of a mortal." The derision in his voice was aimed at me, not Nick. But oddly, I thought I heard frustration and hurt in his words too, as if Nick's actions were a source of pain to him.

I glared at him all the same. Nothing will ever make me feel sympathy for Lacroix, no matter what. "Have I ever told you how much you remind me of Elliot?"

"On several occasions. Not especially surprising, considering he was one of my children."

"How *you* could create someone like Nick, and someone like Elliot . . ." I shook my head in wonder, handed the glass back to him and stood to leave, feeling the futility of any further conversation with my personal demon. ". . . is utterly beyond me."

"You didn't know Nicholas seven hundred years ago. Or Elliot, before he came across." Lacroix was amused again. "They had more in common that you're willing to admit. Just as we do, my dear granddaughter."

"Senility is setting in, Lacroix. I've heard that it does that when you get old. Or perhaps your usual delusions of grandeur are just expanding to include the entire universe." I walked back to the door, paused, and said, "You don't know anything about the murder, right?"

He blinked at me, the picture of insulted dignity. "What do you take me for? A fool or an amateur?"

Which wasn't an answer. But I decided to pretend that it was, and rejoin Brianna. And scan the crowd for potential murderers. And hope that whoever it was, he or she wasn't going to be hungry again soon.

14

Monday night, 8:56 p.m.

"Nice move, Trace. Tell off the Terminator. Why don't you just open an artery in the middle of the Raven and yell out 'free food' while you're at it?" Vachon was applauding mockingly, leaning against my car in the standard grunge outfit which made him fit in with the crowd outside the Raven a lot better than I did.

"Stop leaning on my car. And what are you doing here?" I unlocked the driver's side, then grudgingly flipped the lock on the passenger door at his pointed glance. He slid in with his usual grace, which I envied even while I wondered if I'd have to get the seat covers cleaned. Vachon occasionally likes to hang out with his buddy Screed, who lives in the sewers underneath the city. One visit to his humble abode was enough to convince me that anything that came in contact with the place ought to be fumigated upon leaving.

"I'm trying to keep you from getting both of us killed." He put his hands behind his head and leaned back in the seat coolly, but I could feel a definite undertone of acrid fear through the bond we shared. Morgana had pushed us into this weird position of sharing feelings. Right then, I wished I'd been a lot more personally insulting to her when I'd told her about the murder.

"I thought you said we were safe now." I started the car and pulled away from the curb into traffic with a jerk, and had the satisfaction of seeing Vachon grab at the dash for balance. "That we were 'covered'. Besides, I had something important to tell her. And how do you know I told her off?"

"The words weren't real clear, but the general content came through in stereo SurroundSound." Vachon made a production of buckling his seatbelt. "Do you always drive like this?"

"Like what?"

He rolled his eyes. "Forget I asked. Makes me glad I can fly," I heard him mumble under his breath. "What could have been so important that you had to walk into the spider's lair?"

I stopped at the red light, saw that my fingers were clenching and unclenching on the steering wheel, and forced them to relax. "There's a body in the morgue with bite marks on the neck. Fatal ones."

"Happens all the time." I glanced at him, appalled by his matter-of-fact acceptance of murder. He stared back calmly at me and said, "Green light, Trace." After a few more blocks, he said, "Look. It's not pretty, and it isn't fair, but it happens. Some of us are stupid. And vicious," he added at my squawk of outrage. "If you're going to be a cop in Toronto, or if you're going to be a cop in any big city, you better get used to it. I'm just surprised that it rates a homicide investigation. Homeless people getting killed isn't usually high priority."

"It wasn't a homeless person," I said through gritted teeth. "It was a socialite. The wife of a big mucky-muck lawyer. The press are in a feeding frenzy about it, and *they* just think she got her throat slit after slipping out for a quickie at a party."

"Wow," Vachon breathed out, widening his eyes in a parody of awe-struck fascination. "Something for the society pages."

If I hadn't felt the sharp tang of fear again, I would have slugged him, even if it would've meant crashing the car into a telephone pole. But the sense that I'd been trying to repress wouldn't be ignored. Javier had been concerned before. Now he was actually frightened. Not panicking, not yet, but the flight-or-fight urge was kicking in, with the emphasis on flight. "This is worse than a homeless person getting drained, for some reason?" I asked.

"More publicity, more people nosing around, more contact between your guys and our guys, more chance for bloodshed and chaos . . . Yeah, I'd say it's worse."

"Oh." I absorbed this as I turned the car toward the precinct. "I knew that." I just hadn't let myself consider the details.

"Sure you did." The vampire smirked in a way that made my fingers itch to smack him. The amused condescension in his mind at my lie didn't help.

"Shut up, Vachon." I was thinking fast, ticking over the possibilities in my mind. "More Enforcers?"

"Possibly. Possibly not. Since Little Miss Personality is already on the spot, and you've already told her, we might catch a break there." Vachon whistled tunelessly. "The big problem is your partner."

"Tell me about it. How am I supposed to arrest a vampire without explaining to Nick why we're using titanium cuffs?"

"You don't have to." Vachon was confused, I could feel it, even though he didn't sound it. I realized his voice sounds relaxed even when he doesn't know what's going on. "Morgana the Merciless will take care of it. Your main problem is keeping your partner from getting too close to the killer." That familiar feeling of falseness crept in; something connected with Nick. What did Vachon know about Nick that he wasn't telling me?

I hadn't commented on Vachon's take on the situation with regard to Nick, but all of a sudden he was sitting straight up, body tense, voice deep and forbidding. "**Absolutely not. Put it right out of your head.**"

"What? What are you talking about?" I blinked, startled by the simultaneous sound of his voice in my head and the command issuing out of his mouth.

"You are *not* going after the murderer."

"I'm not? Gee. I guess I'm not."

"Trace . . ."

"Forget it, Vachon. I'm an officer of the law." I set my jaw, feeling my fingers clench on the wheel again. "That . . . Enforcer . . . isn't going to do anything about this except make the murderer leave town, maybe scare them a little. I'm not wishing this problem on another jurisdiction. It ends here."

"Bravo, Dirty Harry Vetter. Now that you're over the stroke, can we talk sense?" Vachon was getting more agitated, to the point where it actually showed on his face. Amazing. "You're going to get killed if you push this, either by the murderer or Morgana. Let her do her job. You can't handle it."

I lost my temper. "How the hell would you know?! You guys are pretty vulnerable during the daytime, aren't you? Do you really think I can't kill a sleeping vampire? How hard can it be? A zippo and some lighter fluid—" I gestured dramatically, then put both hands back on the steering wheel "—and poof! no more killer."

"Tracy—" By now, Vachon was holding his head as if it hurt "—think it through. The odds of you getting that kind of chance are infinitesimal. This guy is going to see you coming. He's going to *kill* you."

"Not if you help."

"Why would I do something that stupid?"

"Because it might be the leverage we need to get out of this mental mind-trap thing," I snapped. "And don't even think of trying to *command* me not to do this. You can't do it and **you know it!**" I saw him wince at the mental shout I'd added to the comment. "If we can prove that this . . . bond isn't needed for me to act in the best interests of both our communities, maybe we can appeal to a higher court. Or whatever. Morgana can't be the only Enforcer out there with a say in how we live our lives."

Silence. Vachon let go of his head and carefully sat up, a mildly quizzical look on his face. He blinked verrry slowly. "It might work."

"Thought you'd see it my way."

"We might have to do some fast talking—" His eyes narrowed as he ran down the eventualities in his mind "—to explain the murderer's death. But it's probably our best chance of convincing the others you're no threat."

"She said I was supposed to give you copies of the evidence reports and she'd track the murderer." I chewed on my lower lip in concentration. "And that we weren't supposed to tell anyone else that she was an Enforcer, or we'd regret it. She didn't want to warn our killer." Remembering the icy, predatory gaze that she'd fixed on me when she said that, I resisted the temptation to tell the next vampire I saw. I might be furious at how she'd screwed with my life, but I'm not suicidal. If she caught up with the murderer first, he'd probably survive the encounter. But he might need extensive medical attention (vampire doctors? The mental image made me smile) after she was through with him.

I wasn't interested in revenge for the victim, but justice. I wanted to insure that there wouldn't be any more drained corpses on Dr. Lambert's slab. Vachon's easy, callous acceptance of the vampires' little 'accidents' made me shiver, and wonder when the last time he killed for blood was. Resolutely, I focused on the case. *Don't make yourself crazy with questions you don't want the answers to, Trace.*

It took me a moment to be sure that the last thought wasn't coming from him.

"Okay. Get me the reports tomorrow, and I'll take them to her." Vachon snorted softly and shook his head. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this."

"You don't have a choice. Besides, you know I'm right."

"And don't think that doesn't scare me, Detective." He got out of the car at the next green light, then leaned back in before he closed the door. "And Trace?"

I glanced over at him impatiently.

"I *could* make you give up on this. I just don't want to." He slammed the door and strolled casually toward the sidewalk.

Yeah, right.

Better believe it, Vetter. Or you'll never be able handle the kind of stuff that might happen when we try to track this killer.

A harsh BEeeeeeppp!!! brought me out of my mental interlude, and I slammed on the gas and lurched across the intersection, unsettled by how easy it was to communicate with Vachon without words, and hoping that this latest idea wouldn't prove to be another classic Vetter it-seemed-like-a-good-idea-at-the-time,-captain! episode.

15

Tuesday night, 10:45 p.m.

Vachon had barely stayed on my rooftop long enough to touch down. As soon as I had the police file from Detective Vetter in my hand he was gone, the seething anger and dislike he must feel toward me almost concealed behind the expressionless, cool mask that he showed the world. I wondered how he and Tracy were dealing with each other's fears, as well as their own. Maybe what I'd asked of them hadn't been as merciful as I'd believed.

I sat down cross-legged on the roof, paging slowly through the investigation report. Mrs. Nora Quentin, age thirty-six, found with her throat slit in the Toronto Regency fairly late on Sunday morning. Signs of alcohol . . . recent sexual activity? . . . post-mortem moving of the body; blood missing from scene; slit to the jugular; bruises and contusions . . . I flipped to the Scene-of-the-Crime photos, and checked the picture of the body. Tracy had been right—definitely a vampire. Frowning, I went back to the coroner's report, and the autopsy photos. The second set of photos had been taken so that the fang marks appeared almost extraneous."Bruises and contusions." Tapping the picture, I muttered to myself, "Willful blindness? No medical explanation, so you didn't want to mention it? What's the story, Dr. N. Lambert?"

Most of the time when our victims end up in the morgue, coroners note Every. Single. Thing. They don't offer theories, they don't speculate, but they never leave out odd details. The Metro Toronto Coroner, on the other hand, had gone so far as to discount the evidence, and almost conceal it. The question was, why?

I closed the folder, looped the rubberband around it, and took off into the sky. Time to visit the morgue.

* * *

Tuesday night 11:05 p.m.

Sneaking into official buildings is easy if you can hypnotize the janitorial staff into letting you into restricted areas, and then make them forget you were ever there. Besides, no one would look twice at me in my current get-up: dark clothes, white lab jacket, glasses—your typical technician. The longer before anyone questioned me, the easier finding out certain details would be.

I waited until I was sure all of the staff were out of the office, then forced the door and made my way to the morgue. Checking against the log sheets, I found the locker where Nora Quentin was stored and opened the drawer, taking care to pull on a pair of surgical gloves first. No sense in confusing the investigation any more than necessary with extraneous evidence.

It's difficult to explain how Enforcers track their prey. It isn't exactly scent, or sight, or a telepathic sense; more a combination. I could detect the traces of many mortals on the body, two in particular: one female, with a definite scent of formaldehyde (probably the coroner), the other male, the last person the deceased had sex with. Strange. I'd have thought the last person Nora Quentin was intimate with would have been the vampire who killed her, but it wasn't.

I leaned closer, examining the fatal wound. The sense of the killer's identity was fading beneath the impersonal, official mortal authorities' handling, but I was certain I'd recognize the vampire who committed this crime if I came across them. Good. Now it was just a matter of luck and timing, and finding the rogue before they got hungry again. This wasn't some out-of-control child; the knife marks were too deliberate, the abandonment of the body too calculated for a bloodthirst killing. Someone was deliberately flaunting the rules, killing a victim who would be noticed and leaving evidence that could be recognized.

I closed the drawer and carefully replaced the log sheet just as the staff was returning from break. Hiding behind the door, I listened to the two women joking about some police detective who'd filled out the wrong forms . . . and then realized, with a sinking, sickening sensation, *why* the medical examiner had concealed the cause of death on the autopsy report.

The coroner was Nick's friend, Natalie.

Shaking, I leaned my head against the wall, adding it all up. Lacroix had to know. This had to be the whole reason he'd sucked me into the Vachon/Tracy problem in the first place. He knew that the doctor helping Nick with his "skin condition" had full knowledge of what he was. That slimy snake had hoped I'd find out about this, pushed me into a corner where I'd eventually learn about Natalie Lambert *after* I'd alienated Nick by my actions with the younger vampire and Nick's partner. With that kind of precedent, I'd have to do something drastic to Natalie Lambert. Damn Lacroix anyway.

I didn't have time for this. Toronto didn't have time for this. I had to catch a renegade, I couldn't be working out how much Dr. Lambert did or didn't know! Calm down. Breathe. Deal with this *later*. For now, just get past the coroner and get out into the city and find the vampire who is slurping on society tidbits. Right. Too bad the only exit was past the good doctor, but given the magnitude of the other problems I was having, this appeared relatively minor.

Pushing open the door, I met Natalie Lambert's gaze with my own. "Dr. Lambert." I smiled into the woman's shocked face, as she glanced from me to the morgue behind me. I was about to launch into my prepared story when she spoke.

"Who . . . Wait a minute, what are you doing—" She'd recognized me. Dammit! Well, she wasn't going to be allowed to remember that I was here at all, now.

"I wasn't here," I said slowly, holding her gaze. She blinked, then her eyes glazed over.

"You weren't here," she repeated after me.

"Tell me why you doctored the autopsy report," I demanded.

"Which one?" she asked calmly, still entranced. I gawked in complete surprise. What had this woman been up to? How many times had she covered for the Community before?

"The last one, the Quentin one," I spluttered.

"I had to." The serene Madonna face didn't even show a trace of anxiety as she admitted her actions.

I waited, then impatiently said, "Why?"

She frowned, an expression of awareness trying to break through her calm. "What—?"

Terrific. Dr. Lambert was a resistor, like Tracy Vetter, only she had a stronger mind, a more focused awareness of what was happening to her. I could *not* deal with this now. Oh, but after I talked to Nick, I'd . . . I shied away from that thought. It couldn't end well. Whatever course I chose now, whatever I did, someone was going to get hurt. Maybe I could just leave Toronto after I caught the killer? Pretend this never happened?

No chance of that. The next time I talked to the rest of the Enforcers, they'd know. *Nick, why do you keep doing this to me?* I thought wildly.

Meanwhile, Dr. Lambert had managed to break free of my slipping mental hold. She was backing away from me, an expression of fear on her face, her hand reaching for the phone. I knocked the instrument off the desk faster than she could possibly see, then grabbed her chin and gave her the simplest, strongest command possible: "Sleep." She collapsed onto the floor as if sand-bagged. All mortals want to sleep, it's the easiest command to reinforce, the first one you learn. I stared at the woman at my feet, furious with her, Nick, Lacroix and myself. How could they break the Code like this? Didn't they understand what kind of danger they'd put themselves in?

Later. I'd do something about this *later*. Now, I had to visit every vampire haunt in Toronto before the killer struck again.

16

Early Wednesday morning, 1:22 a.m.

The voice on the radio was smooth, clear, and resonant. But something about the Lewis Carroll poem the Nightcrawler was reciting made my skin creep.

"Fury said to a mouse,
that he met in the house
Let us both go to law; I will prosecute you.
Come, I'll take no denial;
we must have a trial:
For really this morning I've nothing to do.
Said the mouse to the cur
Such a trial, dear sir
With no jury or judge,
  would be wasting our breath.
I'll be judge, I'll be jury,
Said cunning old Fury
I'll try the whole cause, and
          condemn
            you
              to
                death."

"A succinct commentary on having policeman as executioners, don't you think?" The chuckle that followed this was oily, and made the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

"Can we listen to something else?"

Nick didn't look at me or reply, but he punched in one of the other pre-programmed stations as we drove to the house of our chief suspect, Marcus Grimaldi. I don't know why he likes that program, except maybe it's weird enough to make him feel normal by comparison. Sometimes my partner can be a little eccentric.

By one of those weird strokes of luck that happen when you least expect them, one of the parking attendants at the hotel where Mrs. Quentin's body had been found was able to ID the suspect from the sketch the party guests had put together, and had actually gotten a partial license number. When we ran it through the DMV, only one car fit the description of the suspect's. Now we were on our way over to interrogate Grimaldi, and possibly arrest him.

Which was why I was talking to Vachon in my head.

Get over there. If this is our killer, I'm not risking Nick's life! Or mine!

I'm going, I'm going, but remind me—how are we going to explain this to your partner? Vachon was amused again, with that edge of recklessness added that made me so nervous. *_The murderer will probably come quietly if I'm there, but—_*

I'll think of something, all right? Maybe I got a tip from you?

Was that a question or a suggestion, Trace?

"Tracy?"

"What?" I blinked stupidly at Nick, trying to mentally shut up Vachon and listen to my partner. The look Nick gave me suggested he'd said my name more than once. "Sorry, I was just drifting."

"I said, I'll take the lead on this one. You should probably stay back—"

"Why?" I was jumpy enough to snap at the tiniest excuse. Nick trying to protect me wasn't really that surprising, but when he was the one in need of protection it was annoying as well as inconvenient.

"Because I might need you to call for back-up and head him off if he runs. Are you all right?" Knight eyed me with concern. It struck me that I must be obviously out of it for Nick to be getting this worried. Usually he just teases me until I either tell him what's bothering me, or he bluntly tells me what my problem is.

"I'm fine. Just . . . the flu. Okay, you go in the front—" *_Vachon, are you paying attention?_* "—and I'll go round the back. Okay?"

"Yes."

Yes.

"Perfect." I let out a breath and shook my head, trying to focus on one reality at a time. Nick's cellular rang, allowing me to ignore where I was in favor of what was going on inside my head.

Vachon was thinking of Morgana.

Actually, he was remembering her. I don't think he meant to let me in on it, but the images were coming through with terrifying, unblockable clarity . . .

* * *

It was a bar; a rowdy, dirty, cheap honky-tonk, with a jukebox in the corner, a pool-table in the middle of the room, and neon lights over the bar counter. Cigar smoke filled the air, cheap alcohol was spilled on the floor, and a fight was going on. Bodies were flying around the room: *literally* flying. Half the people in the fight were vampires, and they seemed to be in as much trouble as the human beings, partly because of a fire that had started near the exit. One cowboy was impaled with a pool cue through his stomach; another was lying across the bar, his head at a strange angle; and as I watched the unfolding scene, a vampire in black leather was trying to put out the fire that was eating away at his motorcycle leggings, screaming in pain.

In one corner of the bar stood Morgana.

She looked twice as insane as the creature I'd met in the church. She had a broken pool cue in one hand, her mouth was dribbling blood, and her eyes were completely gold, with the pupils contracted into nonexistence. As I watched, she slammed the pool cue through the back of a vampire she was restraining. Blood was already streaming down his neck from two puncture wounds beneath his jaw. As the pool cue came through his chest, his eyes bugged out for a second, his mouth opening in a silent scream as he vanished.

"Nooo!"

Morgana looked toward us/me. She snarled and launched herself in our/my direction . . .

□□□□□

Trace? Damn, didn't know you were paying attention.

What happened after that? I was shaking, trying to breathe, feeling like I'd been through the wringer. The vividness of the scene and the fear he'd felt were still with me.

The fire spread to the rest of the bar. Most of us got out in time . . . She got distracted by the flames before she got a chance to try to kill me again.

I meant, why is that maniac still alive?

I don't know. She disappeared for a while . . . The next time I saw her was years later. She was as sane as—well, as sane as she is now.

"Tracy?"

"Yeah!" I jumped, a little shocked to realize we were at the suspect's house already. "Yeah. Sorry."

"Look, if you aren't up to this, I could call for more back-up—"

"No! I mean, no, I can handle this, Nick. I just . . . need to get more sleep. I'm ready, though." I made a big show of checking my gun, and tried to smile perkily at Nick. He didn't look convinced.

"If you're sure." We approached the house cautiously. I ducked around the back, scanning the area for Vachon. He was close, I could feel it, but I couldn't tell where he was. I heard Nick knock on the front door of the small dwelling, saying, "Mr. Grimaldi? Metro Homicide—" Silence. "Mr. Grimaldi?" I tried the back door, ready to find Vachon restraining our suspect . . .

A window at the side blew outward, the sound of glass splintering in every direction as I ran to see what had happened. The window was gone, and whoever had broken it was long gone, too. I peered carefully into the building, saying, "Nick?" in a shaky voice as I pointed my gun.

Nick was bending over a body on the floor, looking grim. I could still feel Vachon somewhere off to the side, hiding from me and Nick, as I glanced down at the corpse.

It was our suspect, Marcus Grimaldi. His throat was cut. But behind and beneath the cut, I thought I could see the characteristic puncture marks.

And the body isn't disappearing, Trace. Vachon's voice in my mind was grim.

"Dammit! Our killer just got away," my partner growled. He wasn't looking at me, just staring down at the corpse in disgust. "Did you see anything—?"

"No. Whoever it was disappeared . . ." My voice trailed off. The guy on the floor, the last person to see Nora Quentin alive, was human. And very dead. So our killer was still out there and we had—

"A dead end." Nick shook his head in frustration.

17

Wednesday morning, sometime after 2 a.m.

The last thing I remembered was terror and eyes of gold.

I was lying on the cold tile floor of the morgue. Trembling, I pushed myself into a sitting position and leaned back against my desk. What . . .? Oh, God, of course. Morgana. Nick's friend. Ex-friend. Nick's friend, the Enforcer, had whammied me, hitting me with the mental equivalent of a sandbag. How long had I been out?

About an hour, according to my watch. Why Morgana hadn't killed me when she realized what I knew about her, about vampires in general, was more than I could guess at. What I really wanted to know was why she'd been in my morgue. Evidence tampering, maybe? Just doing her duty as an Enforcer?

Still too weak and dizzy to stand, I pulled the phone down from the desk into my lap and dialed Nick's cellular. Closing my eyes so the room wouldn't spin, I let out a sigh of relief when the words "Knight here" came through the receiver.

"Nick? It's Natalie. We have a big problem."

"Can it wait? We're on our way to question a suspect." Nick's voice sounded irritated, and I could almost hear the "what *now*?" behind the annoyance.

"Morgana was here. At the morgue."

"What!? When?"

"An hour ago. And Nick, she knows about me. She . . ." I stopped, took a breath, let the fear wash over me, tried to let it go. "She knows everything. She didn't say anything about it, she just put me to sleep and left. I haven't checked the body yet, so I don't even know why she was here."

A brief curse in French was Nick's only response.

"Yeah, same here."

"Stay there. *Don't leave.*" Nick lowered his voice, almost whispering. "You'll be safe if you're in a public place. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Tracy's listening, isn't she?"

"Kind of, yes."

"Do you ever think that our lives would be a lot simpler if we just gave up on the secrecy and published the truth in the *Enquirer*, Nick?"

"I don't need my life simplified that much. Stay there, I mean it, Nat. I can't protect you if I can't find you." A click and then the buzz as he hung up. Grace entered the examination room just then, shooting me a puzzled glance as she dropped off some samples.

"The chair wasn't comfortable enough?" she commented.

I considered telling her the truth, or a version of the truth, saying we'd had an intruder or a break-in, then decided not to. "No, just a little tired. We've had a lot to do."

"You should go home. There's a bad flu going around, you know."

Shaking my head, I carefully stood up. "Too much work to do. I want to double-check some results."

"Well, here's the last of the data on the Quentin corpse. Are you sure you're feeling all right?" Grace is a wonderful person. Which is why I hate lying to her. Which is why I *had* to lie to her.

"Yup. Maybe I'll cut out early after Nick gets back." Grace smiled knowingly, and I was too tired to correct her obvious misunderstanding of my remark. Oh, if only I were going back to Nick's place . . .

I went into the storage locker and opened the drawer where Nora Quentin's body was kept. No obvious damage. I minutely examined everything that could possibly be tampered with. Nothing. Why had Morgana wanted to see the corpse?

And why was I still alive?

My beeper went off. Checking the number, I groaned aloud. Nick had said to stay here, and I was getting a call for a crime scene. Perfect timing. I shut the drawer and went back out to my phone and checked my messages. A murder. And Nick was on it. Please, let it not be what I think it is, I implored God. But She either wasn't listening, or had more important things to worry about. Wars in Bosnia. Starving orphans in Africa.

Stuff that almost made sense, in comparison.

❑❑❑❑❑

Later. 2:45 a.m.

I managed to get a good look at our new customer, and make a fair determination as to the cause of death, before Nick realized I was on the scene. "Nat! What are you doing . . .?"

"Nick!" I responded brightly, flicking my eyes to the Scene-of-Crime techs and his partner as my smile widened. Nick's eyes narrowed. He hates having his commands ignored. Sir Nicholas de Brabant occasionally can be extremely medieval in his chivalrous attitudes and his expectations of getting his own way. Fortunately, Nick Knight has had eight-hundred years to learn acceptance of what he can't change. "Looks like your killer struck again. Was this the suspect you mentioned?" I fingered the gash below the young man's neck. Open, bloody, more than wide enough to cause death, but still not quite able to conceal the fang-marks under the jaw.

"Yes, he was. We think the killer left just as we got here." He gestured to a broken window that looked out on the side of the house. "I was trying the front door when someone made an extremely quick exit in that direction. We couldn't follow them." The grimness of his tone said what he couldn't mention in front of the others: to make that quick an exit, someone would have to be a vampire.

Bending down to examine the corpse again, I shook my head. "No, Detective, I don't think so."

"What?" Nick bent down beside me, face a study of hope and confusion. "Why didn't it happen that way, Nat?"

"Because our friend here has been dead for more than two hours. You got here—what? Twenty minutes ago?"

"About that," Nick responded slowly. He blinked, then smiled. "She didn't do it," he whispered.

"She who?" I asked, then I opened my mouth, realization dawning. "Morgana? She was the one who took a dive through the window?"

"I couldn't mention it before," he said in low tones, "and I was hoping . . . When did she pay you a visit?"

"An hour and a half ago."

"You're probably her alibi, Nat." Nick was shaking his head in disbelief and renewed puzzlement. "But how did she get *here*? And why?"

"Why don't we go ask her?" I stood up, motioning for the body to be taken away as I started for the door.

"I'll ask her. You should . . ." Nick walked me to my car, his brow furrowed as he tried to think of what I *should* do, with the threat of death by vampire hanging over my head. It's not a situation where a wide range of options come to mind. Not that it mattered—I already knew what course of action I was following.

"Forget it. I'm not safe anywhere else, so I might as well be with you when we try to get answers from Morgana."

Nick started to argue with me, but I cut him off by getting into my car and slamming the door. I rolled down the window. "You can either meet me over there, or ride with me."

He eyed the car, then the crime scene. "I have one or two things to wrap up. I'll meet you at her place in thirty minutes." Nick turned back to me, blue eyes worried and almost scared. "Nat, please be careful. *Don't* just knock on her door and demand an explanation, okay?"

"If you don't meet me in thirty minutes, I'll assume you're trying to ditch me and I'll do whatever comes to mind." Nick grimaced, and I tried to smile back confidently. "Hey, I'm an expert on you guys, remember? I won't do anything stupid. Stop worrying and give me the directions."

"Fine," Nick sighed and gave me Morgana's address and a quick summation of how to get there, then bent down to the window, catching a tendril of my hair and pushing it out of my face. "I swear, Nat, I won't let her hurt you. I promise."

I nodded. No sense in pointing out that he might not have any say about it. He smiled, stroked my cheek, then quickly turned away. I let out a breath, biting my lip, running over the choices I'd been obsessing about since I first found out about Morgana Harte's profession.

None of them were great. My best chance, Nick's best chance, of a life with some hope for either of us, would rest in Morgana's hands if we let it. Unless . . . unless the bluff I'd been considering worked. If my backup files were as well-hidden as I hoped. If I could do a better job than Tracy or Vachon evidently had, in convincing the Enforcer to leave Nick and me alone.

Time to see how well I could play poker.

18

Wednesday morning, 4:55 AM

The crime scene guys and the ME were on their way out. The only person left to deal with was my partner, who had to be fighting the same frustration I was experiencing. Our best lead was a literal dead end—Marcus Grimaldi had been killed in the same way Nora Quentin had been, and so had switched roles from prime suspect to latest victim before we even got a chance to interview him. Nick didn't know the truth, though: that our killer was a vampire. The case had gotten to the point where I almost *had* to tell him. I couldn't keep deceiving my partner, it wasn't fair to him, it was impossible for me, it was—

Absolutely necessary, Vachon cut into my thoughts.

I thought you split—why didn't you follow the killer?

Two reasons— I felt his grim amusement, none of it at my expense, for once. **—One, that wasn't the killer—**

What?!

"Tracy?" I turned and smiled wearily at my partner. Nick pushed a hand through his hair and closed his eyes in exhaustion. "I just talked to Natalie. Grimaldi's been dead for over two hours—and I doubt our killer hung around hoping to get caught, then dove out the window when we got here."

See?

Will you be quiet?

"Well, at least we didn't let the killer get away," I said aloud.

"Somehow I don't think Reese will be consoled by that thought." Nick grimaced and I felt myself squirm uncomfortably at the incipient dressing-down. Two murders in forty-eight hours with the same M.O., and absolutely no clues to the killer. The captain was not going to be pleased. Too bad I couldn't tell *him* the truth, either; at least he'd be easier to placate if we never found the murderer—after all, how were you supposed to track a vampire? Homing bat?

"It's getting late in the shift—I'm going back to the morgue, and check over the evidence to see if we missed anything. Why don't you go home and take care of that flu?"

"Flu?" I blinked, then remembered the lie I'd told Nick in the car. "Oh. Thanks. Are you sure?" I yawned, faking more weariness than I felt. Nick's eyes narrowed as he studied me. I let my eyelids droop and tried to look dopey and out of it. "I could really use the rest . . ."

"Yeah, sure. Get out of here." Knight let me get all the way to the door before he said, "And Trace?"

"Hmmm?"

"Go. *Home*. Don't do any research, don't follow up any hunches, just go home, okay?" My partner knows me better than I usually give him credit for. Or maybe he's just learned that I don't give up easily.

"Sure. It's sunrise in an hour, anyway—" I bit my lip. That wouldn't reassure Nick, he didn't know the significance of the sunlight. "Time to take a nap." I hailed a cab and gave the driver directions to my apartment, (planning on getting my car and doing some more legwork before sunrise) before I picked up the conversation with Vachon again. **What was the second* _reason?_*

Oww.

Vachon?

Ummm, kinda busy now, Trace . . . A feeling of pain, constriction, violence, anger.

Vachon?! Where are you, what's happening, what's going on?

No words, just an image, hastily stifled—fangs and gold eyes, dark hair and pale skin, Morgana snarling—and familiar surroundings. Then nothing. A blank. An absence unlike any I'd felt in the last three days, since Vachon and I first started sharing each other's minds.

I rapped on the glass between me and the cabbie. "Uh, I just remembered. I need to go somewhere else. Now! And there's fifty bucks in it for you if you get me there in less than ten minutes!"

❑❑❑❑❑

Wednesday morning, 5:15 AM

It was still about forty-five minutes until dawn when the taxi dropped me off in front of Vachon's church. _What do you think you're doing?_ I mentally screamed at myself as I walked into the church. _Now is the time to call for backup! Now is the time to go home and pull the sheets over your head! That is a vampire in here, an extremely angry, strong, scary vampire, who's already done God-knows-what to Javier_ . . . But who could I call for backup? Nick? Captain Reese? I felt a terrible sense of aloneness, as if I had to be responsible for everything that could or might happen in Toronto that was even slightly connected to vampires. Someday I won't be able to take that feeling anymore, and I'll have to tell someone—no. Never. I won't put anyone else in this position. Ever.

I checked my gun, my lighter, and the small crucifix around my neck. There had to be something smarter I could do here. Set fire to the church. _With Vachon in it? Unconscious, maybe?_ Wait until dawn. _How's that going to help?_ The church would still be completely dark, and Vachon might die if I didn't try to help him, do _something_. I grabbed one of the old arm-length beams lying around the floor of the church, wrapped some newspaper around it, and lit it. At least I wasn't going in completely unarmed.

"Come up, Detective Vetter." The voice was cold, quiet, female. Morgana.

Slowly, I climbed the stairs, aware that if she wanted to, I could die as I climbed toward the loft. I held the makeshift torch in front of me, clenching my jaw against the urge to scream. *_Vachon? Vachon!!_* Nothing. A grey numbness, at most. I swallowed, swinging the torch in a circle as I scanned the attic.

Vachon lay on the floor on his back, unmoving. Morgana stood over him with her foot on his throat, studying him with an expression of distaste and anger.

"The tiniest bit of pressure," she said without glancing in my direction, "and his neck snaps. More, and his head will separate from his body."

"Why are you doing this?" I was shaking, and the torch threw crazy shadows as I fought to still my hand.

The Enforcer raised her head, turning her green-eyed gaze upon me. No hint of the vampire in evidence. Just a woman who seemed a little younger than me, dressed in ordinary clothes. But the force of personality behind that look was like a gust of cold wind, tangible and chilling. There were traces of blood on her face, and I took a few steps forward in alarm to get a better view of Vachon, afraid she'd bitten him like she'd done to the vampire he'd remembered in that honky-tonk thirty years ago.

Nothing. Aside from fading bruises around his neck, there were no signs of broken skin, blood, or injury. Confused, I looked back at Morgana. The criss-crossing wounds were healed, but the blood had already dried on her face and hands. Like cuts from glass . . . "You were the one at Grimaldi's," I blurted out.

"You aren't stupid," Morgana said, watching me closely, "so I don't understand why you are pursuing this. You were more than happy to leave the killer's fate in my hands twenty-four hours ago."

"And six minutes later I realized I'd made a mistake," I retorted, tightening my grip on the torch. The flames danced strangely in her eyes, distorted by something behind the surface that wasn't human. "You aren't going to do anything permanent about the murderer—"

"I might. Depends on when I catch up with him." She removed her foot from Vachon's neck, and I bent down to check on him. How can you tell if a vampire is okay? They don't breathe, they have no pulse . . . I examined his neck, which seemed to be okay, and placed my hand against his forehead. Cold and dry, but that was normal for him. Pale, but again, normal for him. Dark lashes rimmed his closed eyes, his face relaxed into almost angelic repose. He looked all of fifteen, and fear and anger rose up in me again. Why wasn't he opening his eyes?

"He'll be all right." The Enforcer took a few steps away and perched on the arm of one of the dark chairs that Vachon kept near the candles. "I came back to find out why he was hanging around Grimaldi's. You know all about that. He was being stubborn. I just put him to sleep. He was making me mad."

Something in her voice made me shift my body so I was between her and Vachon. Carefully, I placed the torch in one of the waist-high metal holders nearby, keeping an eye on her the whole time.

"Detective, this is going to be nearly impossible if the two of you keep interfering. Eventually Javier here is going to make me lose my temper and I'll beat on his skull, which he won't enjoy. So why don't you just call in sick for the next few days, and let me handle this? Nick won't get anywhere near the murderer if his partner is out of commission with the flu."

"What did he say that had you so worked up? Something about Texas?"

She glanced away from me, and licked her lips. It was the first time I'd seen anything like a human expression cross her face since the first night we met at the precinct. Uncertainty. "What do you know about that?"

"You killed some people there," I whispered, never taking my eyes off her. One hand slowly stole into my pocket, and the lighter I kept in my jacket.

"I wasn't in control . . ." Morgana shook her head slowly, then glanced back at me. "That's why there *are* Enforcers. To make sure the kinda thing that happened in Texas doesn't happen again."

"So you're making up for your mistakes?" I asked shakily, clenching my fingers around the smooth plastic of the zippo.

"No." Sharp, harsh denial. "I wasn't responsible for that. It wasn't *my* mistake. It—you wouldn't understand." She stood up, took a few steps closer to me. "Look, you want to make sure the killer doesn't get away with these murders. You think they let me off the hook, and it'll happen this time, too. It won't. This is different, these murders were deliberate, planned, and no one's going to defend the murderer. I promise, this killer won't get away with it. Just let me do my job."

Just a step closer, I thought. But I hesitated, my finger on the button of the lighter. Somehow, she wasn't as arrogant as she'd been before. I was still furious with her on some level, for forcing Vachon and I into a mental box together and closing the lid on it. But I wanted to hear what else she had to say. "You're asking me to trust you."

"Yes."

"I thought you guys weren't real big on trust."

Morgana's eyes widened, and her mouth involuntarily twitched. "We're not."

"If I trust you . . ." I glanced back down at Vachon. A sense of him was starting to return. Pain, memory of what happened—I actually welcomed it. He was going to be okay. "Will you trust me?" She didn't reply, her eyes sliding away from mine. Just then, Vachon opened his eyes and tried to move. "Hey, take it easy," I said, reaching out to him with both hands, leaving the lighter in my pocket.

"Trace?" he muttered groggily. He glimpsed Morgana and groaned. "Are you *still* here? Haven't you had enough fun?"

"You're just endlessly entertaining, Vachon," she replied dryly. "Detective Vetter and I were discussing how you two were going to leave this alone."

"No, we weren't," I interjected, helping Vachon sit up. He was blinking even more than usual, his eyes refusing to focus clearly. "We were discussing trust." I stood up and faced the Enforcer, my insides trembling, but not just with fear. With hope. "Don't you have enough proof that I won't do something stupid and betray your people? Vachon is my friend. I wouldn't expose him to the press, or the police—"

"And the rest of us?" Morgana crossed her arms over her chest, one eyebrow raised skeptically.

"Oh, yeah, I want to be responsible for a world-wide panic. I *want* to start witch hunts and stakings from coast to coast! Will you get real?" I asked in exasperation. I turned back to Javier, still relieved that he was okay, still unable to believe that she hadn't killed both of us yet. But that was what had given me the courage to talk to her like I was. Maybe I hated her methods, but I really couldn't argue with her motives. She just had to understand that I wasn't a danger. I brushed Vachon's hair out of his face, something I'd wanted to do since I came in. He still wasn't really focusing on his surroundings very well, and the abrupt feeling of tenderness that welled up in me probably didn't register with him. I hope not, anyway.

"Besides," Vachon muttered huskily, "she doesn't want to end up in a padded cell. Give her credit for brains, if nothing else." He was holding my hand by this point, his eyes closed again.

"If nothing else," Morgana echoed, mouth still quirking. "Certainly not good sense. She should have stayed out of this. She shouldn't have come here when I knocked you out." She flicked her eyes back to mine, staring into me with the green cat's-eye gaze for what felt like several minutes. The gaze flickered back to Vachon. "You realize, it's already too late. I told the others what happened on Saturday. I can't go back on that."

"Why not?" I demanded. "What would be enough for you people?"

Morgana shrugged, still watching Vachon's exhausted face and closed eyes. "Nothing, really." She sighed deliberately, then looked back at me, just as slowly as the sigh. "No promises." She walked toward the stairs, stopping at the exit. "You won't stay out of it, will you?"

"No."

"Didn't think so." The vampire bit her lip thoughtfully. "Killing you would raise other problems. Bringin' you over, too." She looked at Vachon, who was watching her through slitted lids. "You two are more trouble than you're worth, you know that?"

"We aim to please, ma'am," Vachon drawled, startling laughter out of Morgana, which she cut off abruptly. I had the feeling it was a reminder of something, something from thirty years ago.

"Yeah." She glanced at me, then at the window. "It's almost light. I'll let you know if I need help." A small salute with two fingers, and then she was gone.

"I guess that's all we'll get from her." Disappointed, I turned back to Vachon, to find dark eyes watching me with something like wonder. "What?"

"Nothing," Javier squeezed my hand, then stood up in one fluid motion, moving away from me again. Just like always. "Except . . . maybe we will get out of this alive. So to speak."

19

Wednesday morning, 5:48 AM

Sometimes I almost catch the sunrise. The night starts turning from purple-black to violet, and the stars begin to fade . . . and then lemon streaks appear in the east, and I have to look for shelter. You can watch a sunrise on TV, through a window, but it isn't the same as feeling the warmth on your skin. Until it starts to burn, and you have to flee.

The sky was glowing near the horizon, so I needed to get home. Soon, but there was a stop I had to make first. The confrontation with Detective Vetter and Vachon had almost driven earlier events out of my head, but there was too much I had to do before I let myself rest. The lead Brianna had given me when I visited the Raven after I left the M.E.'s office had panned out, but not in the way I expected.

The trapdoor on the roof of the Raven wasn't bolted shut—they were probably expecting one or two more fledglings to make their way back, pushing their luck further than I had. I slipped in noiselessly, carefully letting it fall shut without slamming, not wanting to alarm the inhabitants.

THUMP . . . . . . thump.
THUMP . . . . . . thump.

I almost gasped, then had to put a hand over my mouth to stop the chuckles that wanted to escape. A dozen young ones hung from the rafters, sleeping sweetly, their heartbeats audible and slow. I hadn't expected them, but I should have. Most fledglings prefer sleeping while hanging to being in a bed or a casket. That way, they wake up where they expect to, on the ceiling. Some don't get the hang of not drifting upward while asleep for several decades, and it's more reassuring not to wonder where you're going to wake up.

Careful not to disturb them, I slipped through the attic, between the unconscious bodies, and made my way downstairs. Tired. So tired. I blinked, then bit down hard on the heel of my hand. I hadn't fed recently, and it was late in the day, which was part of my reason for the detour—I needed to restock my cupboard. The other inducement was waiting at the bar, sampling what looked like the Raven's special blend. Much as I hated to admit it, I needed Lacroix's help.

I took a twenty out of my jacket pocket and put it on the bar in front of Nick's creator. "The one-gallon size."

"Cow or human?" I tilted my head and glared at him. He raised his eyebrows in a parody of innocence. "Forgive me, I thought perhaps you might be adopting Nicholas' practices, since you have always adopted his attitudes."

"I didn't come here to spar with you. The blood, please. And a glass of that," I added, flicking my fingers at his glass. The bar was eerie without the music and dancers; like a stage set without actors or audience. The feeling that the Raven only existed as a stock piece to set off the appearance of the vampires asleep upstairs and in the cellar was unnerving. Could a dance club be brought across, become part of our Community?

Lacroix spoke, cutting my fanciful speculations short. "Have you made any progress in uncovering the rogue? I assume you wouldn't need this—" he gestured with the glass he had poured for me, then set it down "—if you had already found our murderer."

"Yes." I'd had more than enough time to go through Marcus Grimaldi's house and personal belongings before Nick and Tracy had arrived. Enough time to find photos, and notes in his calendar, and smell the scent of Nora Quentin's murderer in the bedroom as well as on Grimaldi's neck. Lacroix seemed surprised at my answer. "It *is* what I do, you know."

"Is it?" he murmured quietly, sipping from his glass, watching me with that intense, cynical gaze. "Well, then. If you know who it is—"

"I know her face. Her scent. I know she was Marcus Grimaldi's lover, and she's been using him to lure other mortals to feed from, and then turn loose with their memories wiped . . . He was her thrall," I said, draining my glass, feeling the buzz of alcohol and human blood make me a little reckless. "I don't know her last name, or where she is. I lost the trail after I . . . left his house." I studied my glass, not wanting to look at Lacroix. I hated admitting failure. "He's dead. She killed him an hour before I got there."

"Was it another obvious kill?"

"Yes." I raised my eyes, studying him. He wasn't surprised. It struck me that he'd never really answered my question from the night before—that he *did* know something specific about the murderer. "But you knew that, didn't you?" I whispered, taking a shot in the dark.

Amusement flickered and died on his face, leaving only the embers of an almost-smile. "I suspect a great deal, Morgana le Fay. I don't mistake that for *knowing*."

"Why didn't you tell me what you knew?!" Always, always he was like this; superior, detached, cold, uncaring, unfeeling . . .

"I delivered a . . . warning, when you informed me of the first kill. I can only assume that she chose to disregard it." At my look of disbelief, he sighed, true weariness creeping through the theatrical facade. "You are not the only one who flouts me, grandchild. And she *is* mad." He took another sip of the drink. "Of course, killing Grimaldi may be her way of covering her trail—"

"Not the way she did it," I contradicted him, anger at his reticence overcoming my annoyance at his condescending attitude. "The police think Toronto has a serial killer now. Where is she, Lacroix?"

"I don't know."

"Don't. Lie," I snarled, feeling my eyes turn gold, and my nails dig into the bar-top, forming deep grooves in the wood. That tiny, satisfying bit of fear was detectable on him, but he didn't look away.

"Believe me or don't. It's the truth," he repeated evenly. I unclenched my hands, shaking with frustration and adrenaline rush. Watching me carefully, he continued to speak in that same calm voice. "Her name is Ava Malenkov. She comes here some nights—which you know already, I assume—and she's old. Older than Nicholas. Younger than me. And she truly doesn't care about the Rules anymore. I think—" He swirled the concoction in his glass, then met my eyes "—that she is bored. Bored to the point of insanity. This is her way of amusing herself."

"She'll kill again," I whispered, feeling sick.

"Of course."

I clenched my jaw, not letting myself look away from his speculative gaze. "Then I'll stop her."

Lacroix's laughter was soft, with a genuine note of wonder in it. "Have you heard nothing I said, little girl?" I felt my eyes narrow in dislike and anger. "She's gone completely rogue."

"Who better to catch her, then?" I smiled, and I could feel the happy madness of rage starting to bubble up again in my veins. "It takes one to know one."

* * *

1970
Venice, Italy

"You're insane, Nicholas."

"I'm eminently sane. In fact, I'm successful, that's what galls you. Isn't it?"

I hovered above the patio where the two older vampires were talking. Nick knew I was there, but didn't mind. Lacroix . . . I shielded myself from him, concentrating only on my friend, Nick. My love. My savior.

"She might have learned better table manners, I'll grant you that. And there's no sign of the foaming-at-the-mouth, either. But she's still mad, underneath it all. Eventually, the memories and the hunger will master her, you must know that."

"No, I don't know that." Nick was annoyed, I could feel it, but he was concealing it well. I could almost remember this other vampire—the voice was one from the nightmares, the bad dreams of blood and fire. But Nick was standing up to him, defending me.

"Lucien, you are not giving the girl enough credit." Janette lit a cigarette, a tiny glow of light in the darkness below me. "If she had the strength to kill Elliot after her crossing, she has the strength to control herself. And she is motivated. Morgana *wants* to fit in. And to please Nicholas."

"You're being far too optimistic, my dear. This new-found control will break at the first challenge to her safety. For instance," and then he whirled, flying at Nick's throat.

I screamed, shocked and enraged. Nick was saying something, but I ignored it. Lacroix was going to kill him, I knew it, he had my friend by the throat, his teeth extended to plunge into his neck. I was on the patio in an instant, leaping on Lacroix's back, pulling his head back away from Nick. Releasing the younger vampire, Lacroix turned to me, smiling, saying something I didn't catch, my fist slamming forward to connect with his jaw. Janette was yelling something . . . She was holding onto my arms, and I was twisting and spitting, trying to reach the monster that had attacked Nick—

Nick brought me back to my senses, standing in my way, protecting Lacroix. "Enough, Morgan!"

"He," I panted, still struggling with Janette, "he was going to—"

"I trust I've made my point," Lacroix said fastidiously, wiping away the blood on his lips, watching me with barely concealed contempt. "Her control is illusory. She can't be let out in polite society. Killing her would be so much simpler, Nicholas—"

"And that is *enough* from you too, Lacroix!" Nick snarled.

I stopped trying to twist away from Janette, who didn't release me, but loosened her grip a bit, whispering to me, trying to calm me—*Nick is all right,* *there is no threat, you are safe, no one is hurt*—I was too shocked to hear Nick actually *yell* to consciously pay attention, but I slowly relaxed as I watched the other two vampires with wide eyes.

"She didn't hear a word I said or Janette said. She was *berserk*, are you incapable of understanding that?" Lacroix shook his head in pity. "Or has your need to help her and redeem your non-existent soul utterly blinded you to reality?"

Nick's eyes were tinged with gold, and he was breathing heavily, but his voice was cold and calm. "On the contrary. She was attempting to defend *me*, Lacroix. Not herself. Morgana was trying to help someone else, to *prevent* violence." He took a few steps over to me, and put his arm around my shaking shoulders. "She is no threat to me or Janette. And your concerns are noted," the younger vampire said in a biting tone, "and irrelevant. I'm not going to abandon her at this late date."

"Fool," Lacroix said softly. "Don't blame me when this experiment ends in bloodshed." He shot into the sky faster than my eye could follow.

"Ignore him," Nick whispered into my hair, kissing me on the forehead as I stared into the sky. "He's wrong."

❑❑❑❑❑

The present

"I invented blood-insanity, Lacroix. I can certainly deal with one bored, semi-suicidal vampire."

"Mmmm." Lacroix twirled the glass stem between his fingers.

"Besides, it's not as if you care what happens to me," I added acerbically.

"That's almost true." He smiled coldly in my direction. "Though Nicholas will be so difficult to live with if you're killed. Even an Enforcer might have trouble dealing with Ava as she is now."

"But that's not your problem."

"No. What happens to the Community is. I assume that you'll be discreet, of course. No need for the police to have any idea of what happened after you've dealt with her."

Which made me remember the other shock I'd gotten tonight, before Tracy and Vachon and Nick surprised me at Grimaldi's. Natalie Lambert.

Lacroix had to know that she knew all about us. About Nick, and the Raven, and the murders, and who-knew-what-else. I thought he'd set up the whole Vetter-and-Vachon situation so I'd be forced to set a precedent, and then have to stick by it when it came to Nick's doctor friend. But if I didn't tell him I knew about her—I might be able to buy myself some time. I might not be forced to inform the Others, or to act on that knowledge until I knew what I was going to do.

She'd protected us, covered for us. She was Nick's friend.

She was a risk. A risk we couldn't afford.

The Others would tell me to kill her. Or bring her over. Thralldom might not satisfy them as a method of damage control.

Nick would try to kill me if I did anything like that.

I might have to kill Nick if I followed the Code.

The Others might kill me if I didn't.

Put like that, I didn't have any choice.

I pushed those thoughts aside. First, the rogue. Then Natalie Lambert.

"Any *suspicions* where I'll find Ava Malenkov?" I picked up the gallon jug and started walking toward the cellar stairs.

"Not really. You might ask Urs—she's one of Vachon's fledglings. She used to speak with Marcus Grimaldi when he came in here."

"Perfect. As if I hadn't already had too much of him," I muttered as I opened the door leading down into the darkness. "Don't tell Nick what you told me," I threw over my shoulder as I made my way downstairs.

The way my luck was going, the only thing missing from the case would be finding out Ava Malenkov was on the Police Commission. Or the Mayor's Council.

20

Wednesday afternoon, 3:12 PM

Caffeine was invented by someone with a merciful and compassionate nature. Especially toward mortals unable to quit obsessing about their problems long enough to get any real sleep.

I hadn't rested well after I went off shift. Nick and I had waited until sunrise for Morgana to return to her apartment with no luck. She never came home. I knew that Nick was worried about her (and maybe, possibly, for her), but I finally managed to convince him to let me drive him back to the loft in the Cadillac's trunk. "She might not return here for the day at all, Nick. Besides, I'm too exhausted to think straight if she *does* come back now, and you're too wired to have a rational conversation with her."

"Somehow I don't think that rational conversation was ever a real possibility, Nat." Nick leaned his forehead against the front door of her apartment, looking like he wanted to pound his head on the door frame. Or kick the door in, anything to be able to *do* something. If it hadn't been daylight, I think he would have flown off to search for Morgana through every block of Toronto.

"How can you know? Maybe she'll back off the murder investigation if you ask her to. Maybe she won't do anything to me." I stood up from the spot where I'd been sitting by her apartment door. We'd debated breaking into Morgana's apartment, but finally agreed that trespassing wasn't the way we wanted to start off the discussion with her. "You helped her once. I know she didn't accept your advice on how to handle Tracy, but she was angry then—and you haven't spoken to her since." I didn't feel as optimistic as I sounded, but there was no reason to give up hope yet. Nick was already stressed, he didn't need my worry on top of his.

"She's an Enforcer." Nick turned to me, his expression closed-off. His tone was hard, distant—his "vampire" voice, with the dismissive, hopeless note that says 'you can't understand, so don't even try'. "She has no loyalties to anyone except the Community and the other Enforcers now."

"Why are you so sure of that?" We walked down the stairs to the parking garage, our footsteps echoing on the concrete. When we reached his Caddy I stopped, fumbling with the keys. "She's still a person underneath the vampire. Like you are. Becoming an Enforcer couldn't have changed her that much—"

"She's not like I am anymore. I would never have coerced Tracy and Vachon as she did." Nick angrily flipped up the trunk lid and climbed in.

"No, but you've done worse." He turned over to look at me, surprise and some measure of hurt in his eyes. "Haven't you? Aren't you trying to make up for it? She might think she has reasons to do what she has, Nick. You said the Enforcers want to protect the Community—"

"By killing anyone and anything that threatens it!"

"She didn't kill Tracy. She might not kill me." I shut the lid down on him, unwilling to let him see how scared I still was of Morgana. The ease with which she'd gotten into my morgue, forced me to talk to her, and then knocked me out had pretty much convinced me that Nick had been right about what he'd guessed earlier: he couldn't take her in a fight. He couldn't protect me from her.

So, I'd have to protect myself. And him. If Morgana killed me or brought me over, it would be one more thing for Nick to feel guilty about, responsible for. He might quit trying to become human again, or worse. And there was no *way* I was going to let that happen if I could prevent it. Nick already has enough to carry on his conscience. I'll admit, I decided to help him before I knew all the risks. But I never thought it would be simple. And I have too much invested in Nick's friendship, in finding a cure, to let Morgana ruin all that work and time by killing me.

Nick had earlier insisted I crash on his sofa. When I tried to protest that I was safe in the daylight, that I had to go home and feed Sidney, he got real quiet, then said, "Please, Natalie. I won't worry about you if you're here," with that pleading gaze that almost always torpedoes my best intentions. Most of the time it's a put-on, and I can laugh then, but sometimes—I gave in, swinging by my apartment to say "hi" to Sid and get a change of clothes, before I drove us back to Nick's. Neither of us felt like talking. We'd rehashed all angles of the murder and Morgana's presence while on our abortive stake-out. Nick trudged up the stairs to the loft after he settled me on the couch with an afghan and pillow, worry and concern still engraved on his face. I doubted that he was going to be able to get much rest.

I slept badly. I kept waking up, sure I could hear someone in the room with me; someone with glowing eyes, and sharp teeth, and a dreadful, thirsty gaze. I dreamed Lacroix mockingly offered me a champagne flute filled with blood, and I accepted, gulping it down while Morgana smiled and Nick watched me with haunted eyes. When I finally woke up completely, I just lay on the couch, shivering, gathering the afghan closer to me and watching the shadows slant across the room.

Physical strength and speed aren't everything. Ever since Saturday night, when Nick had told me about Morgana, I'd been working on an idea to guarantee my safety. I'd come up with what was at best a stop-gap measure, a way to play for more time. The classic one, from every good and bad mystery thriller—the "if I am found dead in bed" letter. A copy of all my files—all my research, notes, proof, everything to do with Nick and his condition—was carefully stored in a safety deposit box in downtown Toronto; in a computer file at the morgue; with a lawyer friend of Richard's, who'd thought I'd seen too many movies when I explained what I wanted done. If I disappeared or died, it would all be sent to the Toronto press, as well as every wire service in Canada.

Insurance. But it would only be insurance for as long as the Enforcers let it exist. Given enough time, persistence, and pressure, they'd be able to find out where I'd hidden the files, destroy them, then come after me. But maybe it would give me enough time to disappear, if I threatened the Enforcers with disclosure if anything "happened" to me.

Except I didn't want to disappear.

I sat up, pulling my knees up to my chest and resting my chin on my top of them as I mulled over my options. I'd known this was one of the main risks of being involved with Nick for two years now. My survival—Nick's return to humanity—all depended on not being seen as a threat. Technically, I was no threat at all, since any normal vampire can kill any normal human being without even making an effort. Lacroix had made that very clear, especially on Valentine's Day.

But Nick's people are vulnerable in so many ways. They can't go out in the sunlight, crosses burn most of them, they won't drink anything but blood. It's only the fact that no one believes in their existence that keeps them safe. Liam, the Irish cop who'd hunted Jack the Ripper through Toronto, had been a believer. He'd helped kill a vampire that other vampires were frightened of—and he was a mere mortal. This was their greatest collective nightmare, and why I understood what Morgana had done in her dealings with Tracy.

Nick still believes that most vampires are inherently evil. Somewhere deep in his mind is the conviction that he's damned, they're all going to hell, and there's nothing short of regaining his humanity that will redeem him. I'm not so certain. I know the process by which vampires are made, I know how they live, I know Nick very well, and I used to know Janette fairly well—and while Lucien Lacroix is one of my least favorite people on this planet, I don't think his vampirism has anything to do with his capacity for evil. I think he was already pretty far down that road when he died the first time.

Morgana might still have some bit of humanity left. She might relent. She might be merciful, for Nick's sake. But how to reach her? How do I convince her that I would never, ever do anything that would hurt Nick, and by extension, the other vampires in the world?

I realized that I'd heard sounds above me for some time when they suddenly stopped. The click of a telephone being shut off brought me out of my brooding. "Nick?"

He came downstairs, heading straight for the fridge and removing a bottle of cow's blood without glancing in my direction. "Yes?" he responded, pulling the cork out with his teeth and spitting it into the trash, then taking a careful sip before turning around.

"Who was that on the phone?" No answer. Nick wouldn't meet my eyes. "It was her, wasn't it?"

"Yes." His troubled blue gaze ranged around the loft. He wasn't angry or furious anymore. He just seemed sad, and a little lost. Nick slowly walked over to me, still holding the bottle. "Natalie . . . I am so sorry for getting you into this. Do you believe that?"

"You don't have to apologize." I stared at him steadily, arms still around my knees. "You haven't done anything wrong. All you wanted was your mortality back. That's no sin, Nick."

"I had no right to bring you into my world when I knew what might happen—what the others might do to you—" It would get tiresome, listening to Nick feel guilty, if he weren't so sincere; and if every time it happened, I didn't have visions of him stepping into the sunlight.

"You didn't bring me into your world. I walked into it under my own power with both eyes open. And I'd do it again." He took another draught from the bottle, fingers tightening around the neck, then stopped, thin-lipped, his eyes clenched shut. "What did she say?"

"She's got a lead on the killer—she wouldn't tell me what exactly—and she's concentrating on the rogue for now. After Nora Quentin's and Marc Grimaldi's murderer is no longer a problem, she'll come for us." Nick's eyes opened, and there was a trace of puzzlement as he looked at me. "But I don't think she knows what she's going to do yet. I don't know what is going on with her . . ." He paused, tilting the bottle back and forth in his hands, studying it. "I don't think she wants to hurt you. She hasn't changed *that* much. But Morgana is positive you're a threat, like Tracy was." He turned and walked back to the kitchen, placing the bottle back in the fridge, then turning around and leaning back against the door. "I think you'd be safer out of Toronto, Nat."

"We already had this conversation. No dice." I got off the couch and walked toward the fridge, opened the freezer door and grimaced at the barren icebox. "No frozen Pop-tarts? No waffles? Not even orange juice?"

"You can have some of the protein drink," Nick suggested.

"I wouldn't dream of depriving you." At the tiny hint of a smile, I grinned widely. "Well, you're buying me breakfast. And after that, you and Tracy have to find our killer . . . After which, we'll invite Morgana out for coffee and bagels, and discuss this problem like reasonable people."

"Mmmmm. I suppose you'll be finding a cure for cancer after that?"

"You never know. My schedule isn't full yet." I shut the freezer door, and leaned toward him. "And I'm not giving up. Not on you. And not on me. If we can't find a loophole in the rules, we'll just have to rewrite them." I turned away from his bemused expression and headed toward the stairs. "But first, a shower. I'm not going in to work with yesterday's crime scene under my fingernails."

21

Wednesday afternoon, 3:10 PM

There are some conversations that can only happen in the dark, where you can't see the other person's face. Often they take place in bed, after passion, before sleep, in that twilight between dreams and love that lets words be spoken that would otherwise never be allowed. Trust and the other's equal vulnerability can forge a connection aided by the mercy of shadows.

Denied the sanctuary of shared passion, a telephone can almost make an adequate substitute—maybe because there is enough distance to create an illusion of safety not found in someone's bed. But it falls short, allows for interpretations of pauses, breath, sighs that presence doesn't.

I'd gotten home after the sun rose, stumbled up the stairs from my basement in an exhaustion-fogged stupor, and collapsed into bed after only removing my jacket and shoes. The phone woke me with its persistent ringing, and I wasn't awake enough to turn on any lights, so I stumbled around my new furniture to where I'd put the phone near the window by my dresser. It was dark already—I should have set the alarm when I came in. There was so much I had to do tonight—

"Morgan?" Nick's voice, hesitantly asking without words whether I was going to hang up.

I was shocked, unprepared for any kind of conversation with him. The man who saved my life. "Yeah. Hi," I mumbled, trying to get my bearings, remembering the unforgivable things we'd said to each other when I stormed out of Nick's apartment . . . was it only four days ago?

"Are you all right?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

"The last time I saw you, you were diving through a plate-glass window and fleeing a crime scene," Nick replied with some asperity. "And . . . I thought you might have caught up with our killer by now." There was a question in that last statement, as well as—worry? For me? Or about what I might do?

"No. I didn't. I take it you haven't found the culprit yet either?" I said, leaning back against the wall, plucking at the blinds nervously, unsure of where this was going.

"No. Grimaldi was our best lead, and now that he's out of the picture . . ." I could hear a weary sigh through the receiver. "I assume he was dead when you got there."

"Yes." I frowned, wondering if he was guessing, or . . . "Natalie told you I visited her." Somehow the words came out as an accusation, despite my best efforts.

"She did mention something about it." Nick was silent a second, then he quietly added, "You scared her badly."

"She should be scared. I can't believe you were so . . ."

"So what? Why don't you just spit it out, Morgana?" Defensive, that.

"Stupid. I can't believe you were so stupid as to tell her what you were. Are."

"It wasn't that simple." It was a plea for understanding, but I didn't feel like hearing it. "It was an accident . . ."

"What? You didn't decide to confide in her? Reveal all? Bare your soul?" I laughed breathlessly, anger overpowering my common sense. "Why, Nick? Can you tell me that? Why? Why didn't you hypnotize it out of her? Oh, I forgot, she's a resistor." My anger was gathering speed. "Okay, it's not *your* fault, Nick. You *couldn't* make her forget. But why, why did you stick around? Why didn't you disappear, bury the evidence—"

"Bury her body, you mean." The steel in Nick's voice brought me up short. "That is what you're asking, isn't it? Why didn't I kill her?"

"No. I—"

"I couldn't do that." He wasn't listening to me. I'm not even sure he was talking to me, Morgana, and not Morgana the Enforcer, to every Enforcer he'd ever met, to Lacroix, Janette, and all of the others. "It was my mistake that put Natalie in danger. My carelessness. And then, when she wasn't afraid of me . . ." A breath, not quite a sigh, too fragile for weariness. "She said she could help. That she wanted to help me become human. That science had the answers, and she just wanted the chance to find out more about us. I needed to believe it was possible."

"And now?" I whispered, my eyes closed, just listening to his voice, the voice that called me back from flames and nightmares. This had always been his dream. I knew that. I knew it when we first met, and I knew it when he'd told me he was still looking for a cure. Why didn't I make the connection between his search, and his friend the coroner? Probably because I didn't want to.

"She's my friend." A pause. "More than a friend. I owe her my life. But even if I didn't . . . I wouldn't kill her, Morgan. Or bring her over. I *won't* do it. Not for the Code. Not for anything. She doesn't deserve that."

"Who does?"

Silence again, then, tentatively, Nick asked me the question I'd been dreading: "Morgan . . . if you feel that way, then why—?"

"God, Nick, do we have to do this? Can't we just leave it—"

"No. Morgan," and at the way he said my name, I had to bite down hard on my tongue to keep from crying, and clench my fingers around the receiver until the knuckles whitened. "I *know* you. This, this . . . job. Being an Enforcer. It's everything you fought against. Everything *we* fought against, for almost two years. You had the madness under control, you'd won, dammit! You were free—"

"Ahh, no," I swallowed, let out a breath, then went on in a voice I couldn't keep from shaking, "I wasn't. It . . . it didn't last. Okay? We were wrong. Lacroix was right—"

"*No*—"

"Yes, listen to me. Listen to me!" I shouted above his protests. "He said the blood, Elliot's blood, would be too strong. He was right. I could keep it in check when you helped, and for a long time after, I was okay." I leaned my head against my knees, eyes squeezed tight, straining to hear his reaction. "But that's because I never really lost my temper, for almost twenty years. Nothing got to me for the longest time. I just went along, happy . . . Well, as happy as I could get . . . and nothing hurt me. Until about ten years ago." My throat closed up.

Nick waited, and after a few long seconds softly demanded, "What happened?" His voice was the same as it was in Venice, when I'd run to him for reassurance, the voice that soothed my terrors. But he couldn't help me now. All of that was in the past.

"Doesn't matter." There were tears running into my mouth. I wiped them away and sat up again. "I lost it, Nick. Everything you taught me. I couldn't get it back. The Enforcers were going to kill me—I was so out of control I *asked* them to kill me—but then they offered me a place with them. They . . . keep me safe. From doing stuff like in Houston."

A long silence this time, weighing heavily on me. Why had I answered the phone? Why? This was pointless . . .

"Why didn't you come to me?" His voice was so full of pain—for me, I realized, and had to clench my jaw against another sob, try to shield myself against his concern. "I would have helped you, you know that." Same old Nick. Kind, sympathetic, devastating.

"There was no time. And you couldn't have fixed it." I shifted the receiver, staring at the ceiling as I lay down on the floor. "It's not so bad."

"How can you say that? You kill people—"

"Oh, right, and your average vampire doesn't?" I snorted. "I kill those who *need* killing. People who are so crazy there's no second chance. Like Marcus Grimaldi's killer."

"You're playing judge, jury, and executioner," Nick accused, bitterness back in his voice. "How can you know who deserves it, and who doesn't? I seem to remember the Enforcers wanted to kill *you* once. They make mistakes, Morgana. *You* can make mistakes. Like you did with Tracy and Vachon."

"Maybe that was a mistake . . . and maybe it wasn't. But I'm not wrong about our killer. She's planning these kills, Nick. She *wants* to get caught by the police. And she's endangering hundreds of lives in the process."

"Who died and made you God?" A serious question, asked softly—Nick trying to make me think, to reconsider what I was, what I was doing. Much too late for that, though.

"Several people in Texas, the last I heard."

"That isn't funny!"

"I know. It's kind of sad." I could feel the polyester weave against my cheek and the cool air creeping through the open window behind the heavy blinds. If I didn't strain for night vision, the room was completely dark, night. "I don't know why, Nick, but I want you to forgive me for all of this. Pathetic, isn't it?"

"No. It isn't." Another pause, then his voice again, measured and calm. Not cold; he couldn't quite manage that now that he'd gotten the answers he wanted. But relentless. "I can forgive you for becoming an Enforcer—I can't stand in judgement on that. I know too much about you, and maybe, if I'd been there . . ." He let it trail off, and I shook my head, knowing that Nick would never believe that there was nothing he could have done. "I can't forgive what you did to Tracy and Vachon. That was cruel and unnecessary."

"So you say."

"There are thousands of mortals that know about us. You probably know this even better than I do. Don Constantine was one, here in Toronto. There are mortal helpers in Los Angeles, Hong Kong, all over the world . . . I'm sure we could both write out a long list."

"But there's a difference between them and Tracy Vetter, Nick. She's a cop. And those others—they have as much to lose if we're exposed as the Community does. They make their living off us, they have their own secrets! Your partner isn't like that. No one decided she was an acceptable risk. You and Vachon just didn't want to deal with the consequences of his carelessness."

"Tracy is trustworthy. So is Natalie."

"That's not your decision to make."

"Why is it yours, can you tell me that?"

I curled into a tighter ball, hurting with him, hearing the desperation and fear inside Nick. "Because I'm here. And I am what I am. For the same reason I have to deal with our killer . . . If I don't do it, someone even harsher will." I opened my eyes, stood up slowly, and opened the blinds. Nightfall. "If it were just me, Nick, I could almost let it slide. I could almost believe that your friend wouldn't betray you. What is going on with her and the coroner's office, anyway?" I shook my head, trying to focus on the problem at hand. "But it isn't just me."

"What's the worst they can do to you for not following orders?"

"Kill me. Or order me to kill you."

"Would you?" Soft, quiet. It hurt that he would ask. Hurt that he'd even think I'd . . .

"Nick, don't do this to me. Please." I knew where he stood: on the opposite side from me. And the hell of it was, I understood his feelings. "Why are you making me choose?" I pressed my forehead against the glass, studying the lights below, feeling the thin, almost nonexistent connection between us reverberate with pain. "Why? You know what they'll do to me. You know they'll only send others . . . I can't be the first to suspect. This is hopeless, you have to know that!"

"You sound like Lacroix."

I straightened. "Low blow, Nick."

"Well, you do." He was angry again. "In the first place, nothing is hopeless. I have never heard you say that you've been ordered to kill Nat *or* bring her over or do anything else! Or that you'd already told them about her. Have you?"

"No," I whispered. "But Nick, it doesn't matter . . ."

"It does matter. You can convince them—"

"They'll kill me for a traitor for even thinking it."

Stark silence.

"Nick?"

"I'm sorry. You're right, this isn't fair to you." The weariness in his voice echoed my own. "All I'm asking . . . is for time. And I don't want to have to hate you, Morgan."

I hugged myself, shoulders hunched and arms crossed. It wasn't fair. But my life stopped being fair about thirty years ago. "It's only a matter of days. After I deal with our murderer, I'll *have* to contact them. I've been putting it off . . . but there'll be no way to avoid it then."

"Promise me you won't decide anything until after one of us catches the murderer." How do you refuse a request like that? *Please don't kill my best friend for a couple days, I need to get her ready to die?*

"Okay."

"And you won't do anything without me there?"

"Nick . . ."

"Please, Morgan. I'm begging you."

I never had a chance, not really. Once I was in love with him, once I thought he was the best man in the world, once I thought it was only a matter of time until we'd be together. I outgrew those illusions somewhere, sometime (when I saw him kiss Janette? yearn for sunlight? say good-bye to me without regret?) but some residue remained of those fairytales. Even knowing I'd have to kill him if I promised, I couldn't refuse.

"Yes. I promise."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. I'll come looking for the two of you after I've dealt with the killer. I mean it, Nick."

"I know." Why didn't he sound worried? Didn't he believe me? "Until then . . . be careful, will you?"

Utterly confused, I nodded, even though he couldn't see it. "You, too. Good night, Nick."

"Good-bye." Click.

I put down the phone, feeling empty, numb. I speculated on where Urs might be, and where the killer might be. I got dressed, drank my dinner, locked up my apartment, went on the roof. Stared up at the stars.

I couldn't kill Nick. I knew that.

I didn't want to die.

When did my choices narrow down to this? How did I get here?

22

Wednesday afternoon, 4:30 PM

I was looking into a pair of dark eyes. Lover's eyes. I have no idea where we were—the lighting was diffuse, and the sound of distant, rhythmic music were audible—because it didn't really matter where. All that mattered was standing in front of me, unsmiling, intently studying my face. I knew it was a dream. And in dreams, you can do anything you want and it doesn't matter. Not really.

I lifted a finger to trace his mouth, the mouth I usually make an effort *not* to look at, much less touch, because I have a tendency to blush when I'm caught staring at it. Soft, full lips, which parted just a little when I pressed on them. Vachon's eyes slowly closed as my finger slipped into his mouth, and the sensation of his sucking at the length of my finger sent shivers of heat through me. I felt a tiny pin-prick of pain, but it was unimportant. The pleasure intensified, and I could feel myself smiling languorously. He lifted his hand and removed my finger from his mouth, and I was distantly aware that there were beads of bright red blood coming from the wound on its tip. He licked them off, watching me all the while, then kissed the center of my palm, his tongue licking at the lines on my hand . . . *¿Qué quieres?*

I sat bolt upright in bed, gasping for breath. "Oh, my God." I clenched my fists into the bed sheets, not sure whether to die of embarrassment, frustration, or anger. How could Vachon do that to me? He knew I didn't want to get any deeper into his mind than I had to. That rat! He—

Blinking, I realized that I couldn't feel any protests or defensiveness coming from him. I gingerly reached out with tentative mental fingers toward Vachon. Then I almost got pulled in again by an undertow of images and pure sensation which enveloped me in a seductive warmth. Pulling back, I tried to make sense of what was happening—and then I understood. He was still asleep.

We'd both been asleep. Dreaming about each other. It had happened without either of us consciously reaching for the other, without even trying.

Shaken, I checked the clock. It was only twenty minutes until I had to get up anyway, and there was no way I was going to be able to go to sleep after *that*. Trying to suppress the uneasiness the dream had left me with, I started to get ready for work.

After Morgana had left the church the night before, Vachon and I had tried to make sense of the few clues we had to the killer's identity, but the bruises and weariness that he was fighting kept distracting both of us, so I finally left him about half an hour later. "Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

"I'm fine. Just sore. She wasn't really trying to hurt me, not after she knocked me out." Vachon quirked a grin in my direction as he collapsed into one of the chairs. "What amazes me is that she didn't break a couple of *your* bones for mouthing off to her like that."

"I wasn't mouthing off. I was just . . . clearing the air."

Javier snorted. "Expressing an opposing opinion, or trying to tell an Enforcer that there might be any point of view that isn't theirs *is* mouthing off in their books. She must really like Knight, otherwise . . ." His voice trailed off, and his eyes closed in sleepiness.

"Do you think she'll let us out of this . . . thralldom?" I asked, picking up my purse and heading for the stairs. "We've only been trying to help. She knows that now."

"Don't bet on it. Your first instinct was right. We'll have to catch the killer to convince her." Vachon yawned, his eyes unfocusing as his head leaned back. "You were pretty brave tonight. Not bright, but brave . . . I didn't know you had it in you." I was almost insulted, until I saw the smile he didn't try to hide, and felt the wash of affection that warmed me like the sun.

I wonder who dreamed of who first. He was asleep first, but I've heard a person dreams about five different dreams a night, and . . . never mind. Quit thinking about it, Vetter. File it under "you don't want to know." I'm not sure which alternative is scarier.

Remembering what Vachon said about Morgana's view of our efforts as I got ready for work made me all the more determined to catch our killer as soon as possible. That, and the thought of what Captain Reese would say when he heard about the abrupt departure someone made from the crime-scene just as Nick and I got there.

Because it's not like I could exactly tell him it wasn't the murderer, because then he'd want to know how I knew, and he'd want another suspect, and then . . . somehow I didn't think the captain was going to be too happy with either Nick or myself when we got in and made our reports. Especially since we now had no leads at all, no motive, no weapon, no witnesses . . . nothing. And my best chance of stopping the killer was going to require having Vachon on the spot when the arrest went down, which was also going to take a lot of explaining, assuming we ever got to that point.

❑❑❑❑❑

Later—6:18 PM,
Metro Homicide, 96th Precinct

I'd been right about how the captain would take the news.

"You have *got* to be kidding me."

"I'm sorry, cap. We tried to pursue the suspect but whoever it was was just too fast," Nick was telling our superior officer when I came in. He sounded frustrated, defensive, and ready to take it out on his partner. Great. Sometimes Nick is good to work with (okay, most of the time he's a decent partner) but there are times his moodiness makes him the absolute end word in depression. I keep thinking I ought to carry a stun gun or a bottle of Prozac to jolt him out of the black doldrums he gets into when a case is going bad. "If it's any consolation, Nat says the victim died about an hour and a half before we got there. It's fairly unlikely that the person who left the scene was our killer—"

"But not impossible, Knight, you know that." Reese shook his head, looking from one of us to the other. "Get me something by the end of the day, or you two can be the ones to tell the press we have no leads—personally. They're jamming our phone lines as it is! I know you're doing your best, but there has to be something you missed. And get those files from the Jordan case on my desk by 2 p.m., they're estimating that the grand jury verdict will be in by the end of the day."

Nick's lips thinned into a line, and he gave our boss a curt nod before dragging me back to our case files. The next two hours were spent trying to find anything to connect Marcus Grimaldi and Nora Quentin together. Paperwork, computer work, endless statements . . . Whoever said police work was glamourous was working from a different reality.

"Random chance," I muttered out loud. "That's got to be what it is. Our killer is picking them out just because they're there." I raised my eyes from the folder to see Nick brooding over his computer. "Anything? Anything at all?"

"No." Knight banged his coffee cup down in frustration, sending Natalie's special herbal tea sloshing over the papers on his desk. Cursing under his breath, he started to wipe up the mess while talking to me. "They have nothing in common, they never met before Saturday night, no mutual acquaintances, no contact. *Nothing*."

I frowned, staring at Marcus Grimaldi's legal papers. "That's weird."

"What?" Nick asked, looking up from his desk eagerly.

"Grimaldi was renting the house he was living in, right?"

"Right. It was in his file."

"Well, he wasn't paying the rent." I waved a cancelled check at him. "This is made out to the landlord from one Ava Malenkov. There's similar checks every month . . . and a couple covering expenses a few times. A new suit, a couple car payments—I'd say someone had found themselves a sugarmama."

Grinning, Nick stood up and grabbed his coat. "A lead. Finally. I'll check it out."

"Hey, I'm the one who found it—"

"Someone has to tell the captain, and we're way behind in the casework, and the Jordan file needs to be finished, and—" Nick grabbed the check out of my hand, wrinkling his nose as he smiled at me, and nearly ran for the exit "—you can catch up to me later!"

"I'll get you for this, Knight!" I yelled after his retreating back. In response to the stares I got from my co-workers, I grimaced, blushing, then glared at them. "What? What are you looking at?"

I started to put the Grimaldi file away, then changed my mind and opened it again. Ava Malenkov had been paying for a lot of Victim #2's expenses. It also looked like she banked at one of the more high-end financial institutions in town, and the address on the check was for one of the exclusive condominium complexes by the lake. So maybe she'd been the link between Grimaldi and Nora Quentin. Mrs. Quentin had been rich in her own right, aside from her husband's legal practice . . . Maybe they met at the country club. Maybe Marcus had crashed a party that Ava Malenkov was attending, and met Nora Quentin, slightly drunk and on the prowl. I checked the Quentin file, and there it was. Paydirt. Ms. Malenkov had left the party early, but she'd definitely been on the guest list. Which meant she was the link. It served Nick right for running out of here so fast without grabbing the files. We'd just have to go back and interview her again if he didn't ask the right questions.

Suddenly, I thought of something that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. What if . . . what if she were our murderer? What if she killed Nora Quentin, and Marcus Grimaldi, out of some jealous grudge?

What if my partner had just gone to interview someone who could wipe his memory, drain his blood, and break his neck?

I stood up, then caught Captain Reese's eye through his open office door, and slowly sat back down. I had to stop Nick from getting killed. And I might be wrong (well, it was a slim chance, but I preferred it to no chance at all) about our murderer. Which left me with one alternative.

Gritting my teeth, I bent over the file and closed my eyes. **Vachon.** Silence, a sense of irritation. **Vachon!** A definite feeling of . . . being ignored. I squinched my eyes shut, and put all my concentration into it. **VACHON!**

What?! I'm busy!

It's important.

You think it's important. How could someone I'd been having sensual dreams about four hours ago be so annoying?

Nick just went to interview someone, and I think it might be our murderer.

Why aren't you with him?

Bureaucracy. Please, please, could you go check on him?

He's a big boy, he can take care of himself.

Not from one of you, he can't. More silence from Vachon. Frustration, anger . . . lust. What on earth . . .? Oh, *that* kind of busy. I hoped no one in the station noticed my blush, because this time I couldn't explain it. **Will you quit thinking with your hormones for two seconds! This is an emergency!**

After a long, uncomfortable pause, he finally responded with, **Someone, somewhere, is going to pay for this. I'll go babysit your partner until he leaves the suspect's place, and then I don't want you to call me unless you're about to get killed.**

Stung, I shot back, **No problem. I have a life.**

Where is he?

Black Opal Condominiums, the penthouse suite in the Onyx Building. Tell me what's happening when you get there. Please.

You're a royal pain, Trace. And you owe me. Our connection was abruptly terminated. Owe you what? I wanted to shout back at him, but it was probably a good thing he'd already mentally left.

Fifteen minutes later, I got a jolt while trying to sip my coffee. **Okay, I'm here. I'm outside the penthouse, can you see him?* *

And suddenly I could, like before when Morgana beat up on Vachon, the weird vision overlaying the rest of my world. Nick was in the penthouse suite of a luxury condo complex, and fortunately the shades weren't drawn on the wall-length windows. I blinked. **Where are you?* *

The building next door. They must be on vacation. I got a sudden glimpse of a big-screen TV, fireplace, and wet bar. **Nice digs. No taste, but comfortable.** The view slewed back to Nick in the other condo, talking to a petite redhead in a very sexy nightgown and robe. **I think she likes your partner.* *

Just as long she doesn't like him too much. Is she one . . . a vampire? I forced myself to think the word, not wanting to give Vachon any more cause for amusement.

Can't tell at this distance. Hang on. He opened a window and I got this sudden *rush* of falling, freedom . . . I gasped aloud, then glanced around the squad room to make sure no one noticed. The feeling continued, the visceral tingling of air on my arms, of swooping upward higher and higher . . . then of drifting slowly down to a stop. Vachon was on the balcony, outside the condo. **Yup. She's one of us. I think we've found our killer.* *

Triumph and concern warred for supremacy. Triumph won. **Yes! Now if I can just get out of here, then after Nick leaves we can take care of her.* *

**Kill her. Learn how to say the words, or you'll never do the deed.* *

Vachon! I bit my lip, typing in the last of the Jordan case as I spoke with him. **Okay. Kill her. It's necessary. It's got to be done . . . right?* *

I don't know about that. But it might be the one thing that'll get us free of . . . Think of the devil. I watched in shock as Morgana drifted down to perch on the balcony railing across from Vachon. **She works fast,** he commented grimly. **I wonder if we'll still get credit for this?* *

**That's it. I'm on my way over there now. Don't let Nick get hurt before I get there.* *

**You want me to let him get hurt after you get here?* *

Smartass— But Morgana was speaking to Vachon, who abruptly cut the connection. **Vachon!** Nothing. **VACHON!** Nada, niento, zip. **Javier, please . . .** I had to know what was going on. I had to be there. I hit PRINT and then hurried over to the laserprinter, grabbed the sheets, stuck them in a folder, leaned into Captain Reese's office and frisbeed it onto his desk, then ran back to grab my coat.

"Vetter! Where are you going?"

"Gotta catch up with Nick, he's interviewing a suspect, only he doesn't know it. Anything else, cap?"

"Uh . . ." He scratched his head. "I guess not. Can't you two ever coordinate these things?" he called after me as I ran out the door.

I already had my ready-made Stake-a-Vampire kit in the trunk, and I grabbed the cross I'd stashed in my glove compartment and slung it around my neck as I put my car in gear. "Nick, don't you dare get yourself killed. Don't you dare."

23

Wednesday evening, 7:00 PM

The Raven opens for business at seven every night except Sunday, when it opens a few hours later—there's less business on Sundays, and while economics may not be the deciding factor in most of the decisions Lacroix makes, I think he likes to have the extra time to fix whatever may have gone wrong on Saturday nights. Fledglings can be destructive when they've been feeding and drinking and dancing with mortals, and the back rooms can take a beating on those evenings. The meticulousness that has been part of Lacroix's character for as long as I've known him extends to having the club in perfect shape whenever possible. It's pity that he also brings that obsessiveness into his relationships with his family, instead of using it for something relatively constructive—say, taking over the world economy.

But this was Wednesday night, so at seven on the dot I was there, looking through the already crowded room for Urs. Love and Rockets' "So Alive" was thumping through the loudspeakers, and Brianna was behind the bar instead of working the tables. I'd gone Goth to fit in, which is not my usual look, but I thought it might reassure Vachon's fledgling that I was 'ordinary' and that the questions I was going to ask about Ava Malenkov were completely harmless. No sense in making her suspicious of me.

Brianna had pointed out Urs to me on Monday night, while she was dancing for the spectators. She'd struck me as a classic youngster at the time, although from what Brianna said Urs was at least fifty years older than I am. But then, age isn't everything. From one point of view I'm older than she is; I have all of Elliot's strength and memories running through my veins, and he was well into his second century when he died. And I'm now an Enforcer, which gives me access to even more power and the skills to control it. As well as darker gifts.

"Nice outfit," Brianna commented when I approached the bar. "Janette would be proud. You on the prowl tonight?" She slid a glass of the Raven's best over to me and took the bill I held out to her.

"Maybe. We'll see how the evening pans out, what's available for . . . exploration." Idly, I leaned back against the bar, crossing my black-leather-clad legs as I adjusted the zipper on my jacket so it opened just below the zebra-pattern bodice I wore underneath. "Is Urs around? I wanted to ask her about a friend of mine. Feliks said she hangs out with Ava Malenkov sometimes?" I studied my boots, wondering if they were too much, or if the lacing up to my knees added just the right touch to the ensemble.

Brianna sounded unhappy. "Yeah. She used to, I think. You're friends with her?" she asked with evident distaste.

I kept my expression neutral and sipped my drink, careful not to leave lipstick on the glass. "More like acquaintances. I met her in Vienna once. Why? What's wrong with her?" I turned around to see her expression. Brianna seemed uneasy, and glanced at me indecisively.

"She's trouble," she responded finally. "I know she's older than us . . . Maybe even older than Janette. She acts like that makes her special, like she doesn't have to worry about the rules. Treats her mortals like they're on choke-chains. I wouldn't hang out with her, if I were you. Urs doesn't see much of her anymore."

"Hmmm. Strange, that doesn't sound like the woman I knew," I lied, shaking my head. "When does Urs get in?"

"Later." Brianna seemed to have recovered her equilibrium, pushing disturbing thoughts of aged vampires out of her mind. She grinned, quirking an eyebrow. "Blondie's a heavy sleeper."

Lacroix started his radio show at nine, flipping on the ON THE AIR sign and smiling benevolently out at the growing crowd. "Good evening, my children. Welcome to the hunting grounds." Music with a heavy backbeat and bass line started throbbing beneath his words. "We're all hunting for something. Answers. Distraction. The fulfillment of a midnight prayer." The music picked up, and in the eerie glow of the booth's lights I could see him gesture out at the crowd. "Or perhaps just a moment in the elemental fire. Whatever you are looking for, whatever your prey, you know you have a friend in the Nightcrawler . . ."

I shivered, then noticed Urs stalk up to the stage in a gold sheath that looked like it had been poured on her. I watched her dance as I waited out the set, and I had to revise my first impression of her. She might have been young, and she was definitely hunting mortal prey, but there was an air of desperation to her dancing that didn't accord with what I'd assumed Vachon's fledgling would be like—relaxed and assured like her master. This girl wasn't assured; and I got the sense of someone dancing on the edge of a precipice, hoping to fall. Or maybe I was reading too much into what I saw—dancers are like actors, sometimes taking on the tone of the music and the crowd and reflecting them back.

"Urs?" I asked, approaching her after she left the platform.

"Yes?" She studied me warily, and took the drink I offered but didn't drink. "Have we met?"

"No, but we have friends in common. My name is Morgana. Brianna mentioned that you know Ava?"

"She's not a friend." Urs put down the drink, and leaned away from me. "Just someone I used to know. She liked the way I dance."

"Well, do you know where she is?" I could hear my voice begin to take on an edge, and tried to modify it. I smiled, attempting to force an air of nonchalance, but Urs's wide, dark eyes held a certain amount of fear, and I wondered how much Vachon had told her about me.

"She has a place by the lake . . . those condos on the south side. Ritzy. The Black Opal complex." She swirled her drink in the glass, taking a slow sip, not looking at me. "You don't want to find her."

"Why not?" My voice dropped as I caught her caution. She hadn't been afraid of me—it was the mention of Ava Malenkov that had frightened her.

"Ava's not a safe person. She's careless." Raising her eyes from the glass, she gazed at me intently. "She likes to take mortals back to her place—a few at a time—and have fun with them. She made pets out of one or two. But she started getting extreme a couple months ago. Humans are fragile . . ." She fell silent, and I had to prompt her to go on, which she reluctantly did. "Mind games, mostly. Leaving funny suggestions for later. She killed one that way. Told him to drive his car into a median during rush hour." Urs shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "I avoided her after that. I'm not squeamish, but . . ." She fell silent again, her gaze wandering around the room, unable to meet my eyes.

"Would she be home right now, you think?" I asked, paying off the rest of my bar tab.

"Yeah. She picked up someone here last night. A girl . . . She probably isn't finished with her yet." Urs grabbed my wrist as I put down my glass. "Listen—be careful. Ava has an odd sense of humor. If she doesn't want to be interrupted, she'll do something you won't like."

"Thanks for the warning." I gave what I hoped was a reassuring smile and left the dancer to her drink, walking out toward the back alley so I could take off without being seen. Lacroix was talking again as I went by the booth, and I paused at the door, unable to resist the coaxing voice.

"Do you set traps for your prey? Stalk your dreams carefully, and put out bait for them to follow? Attempt to lure answers out of the world with cunning lines, then draw them toward yourself to capture?" He leaned back, eyes narrowed, caught sight of me and smiled thinly. "Or do you attack them directly, so caught up in the hunt that you forget the purpose, lost in the need to attack?" I felt my jaw clench, unable to look away from him. "And so your prey slips through your fingers, and you are left to plot another advance . . ."

I wanted to ask him about Natalie Lambert. I'd meant to ask Brianna about her, to find out if her relationship with Nick were generally known; but there hadn't been time, or enough of an excuse to bring up the subject. If she were unknown to most of the Community, that would be good; or if they had a good opinion of her, I might be able to make a case for bringing her over, instead of killing her, to the Others. But catching the killer was more urgent than dealing with Natalie Lambert, and once that was done, there'd be very little time to find out more about her before I'd have to speak with the other Enforcers.

From the moment I'd gotten to Toronto events had been out of my hands, and they had been out of my hands because of Lacroix. He'd pushed me toward Vachon and Tracy Vetter, so that I'd be forced to follow my own precedent when dealing with Dr. Lambert. Why ask him what I already knew? Did I hope that he'd tell me that her death was unnecessary? Or that he'd say he had no idea how far Nick had compromised the security of our world?

And yet . . . I wanted to know *why*. Nick had made other attempts at mortality, but Lacroix often let them run their course, laughing in the background as his child tried to escape his nature. Janette had explained a good deal of their relationship to me at one point when I'd asked why they were at odds. So why had he set me up, directed me indirectly toward Nick's friend and doctor? Was she that much of a threat to him—were they so close to finding a cure for Nick? Did he simply dislike her? Or was it something more complex . . . A desire to harm Nick, and me, and Natalie Lambert—and prove his mastery over us all?

I might be able to take him in a fight, but physical violence was never the greatest danger with Lacroix. He was much too subtle. While I would take the direct approach, and find myself holding nothing in my hands, he would smile, say a few words and wreak havoc. Twist the truth, manipulate my loyalties . . . Any answers I got from him would only do more damage. To Nick, to Natalie, and to myself. I shut the door, and left the Raven hurriedly, trying to concentrate on the immediate problem of Ava Malenkov, instead of the more painful questions posed by Nick's friend.

Maybe I'd get lucky. Maybe she'd kill me and I wouldn't have to deal with the whole mess.

24

Wednesday night, 9:23 PM

To say that I was unhappy to see Javier Vachon outside my suspect's penthouse would be an exaggeration. By now I almost expected him and Detective Vetter to show up at the most inconvenient times, and having spotted him waiting *outside* the condo I knew better than to burst in on Ava Malenkov. Something had to be going on inside, and I needed more information before I made my entrance. But I wasn't exactly pleased to see him, either.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I whispered after I settled down next to him on the balustrade of the balcony. Leaning forward, I could see Nick and a petite redhead through the sliding glass doors. The entire decor was white: white furniture, white walls, white carpeting, white paneling, white curtains, white candles in white holders. Very boring, but designed to set off the owner's looks—long trailing red hair, black eyes, pale skin under a sheer black negligee and robe. Anyone that concerned with appearances didn't have enough in their life to keep themselves amused.

"Tracy sent me along as Nick's backup." Vachon rolled his eyes, then glared at me. "How did you find Ms. Malenkov?" he asked quietly, ducking backward as Nick came closer to the doors.

"You really ought to spend more time with your fledglings—Urs was very informative." I scooted over on the balustrade. Nick and Ava might have been able to detect us if they weren't so wrapped up in their own conversation. The woman was watching Nick in a very familiar way—in every sense of the word. "How long has Nick been here?"

"About twenty minutes, I think . . ." Vachon paused at a gesture from me, as I picked up on the discussion inside the living room.

"You killed Grimaldi, didn't you?" Subtle as a brick, that's my Nick. His brows were drawn down in an expression of grim concern as Malenkov traced a finger down the edge of his jacket. Wide-set eyes framed with dark lashes blinked at him innocently, but the look she gave him was anything but. He didn't seem to notice the signals she was giving him, or maybe he just didn't care. Nothing like suspecting a woman of murder to cool a man's ardor—at least if that man has any sense at all.

"No, of course I didn't! I loved Marcus . . ." Her lower lip trembled, and I exchanged a glance of pure disgust with Vachon. Nick didn't seem to believe her either, although his expression was becoming slightly more sympathetic.

"Don't tell me he's buying this," grumbled Vachon.

"He isn't. But he's starting to feel sorry for her," I whispered back. "As soon as he's gone, she's mine. Got it?"

"You can have her." The face Vachon made reminded me of Janette's, when she would accidentally drink Nick's cow blood. "Just remember, I was ready to stand by and help—"

"Stay out here when I go in—I don't have any assistance, and she *is* older than either of us." The vibes I'd been getting from her were disquieting, similar to those from Lacroix, although not so intimidating. I had enough skill to shield myself and Vachon from her notice while something else (Nick) had her occupied, but as soon as he left, I'd have to deal with her as quickly as possible. Malenkov was still trying to ensnare Nick in her lies and her fingers.

Nick was speaking again. "Was it an impulse? Did you catch him with Nora Quentin, and kill her on the spur of the moment? Or did you plan it, the way you planned his murder?" He backed away from her a step, studying her face, then quietly added, "Either way, you're going to have to leave town. You've drawn too much attention to us."

I couldn't see her face, but Ava Malenkov paused, then bowed her head, saying softly, "I loved him so much . . . I know you're right. I don't want to hurt anyone else, and I'm not sure I want to stay in Toronto any longer. But you have to believe me—I did love him." The pleading tones seemed to be working on Nick, who merely nodded and then turned to go. I let out a breath of relief. One less thing to argue with Nick about if Ava Malenkov merely disappeared. He'd never have to know that I'd killed her.

If only it could have been that simple.

It would have been, except that as Nick turned to leave, a young woman walked into the room from the hallway, rubbing sleep out of her eyes. A mortal—I could hear the thump of her heart from where I hid. Nick heard it too, and stopped, his eyes accusing Ava Malenkov as he faced her.

"Kendra." Ava's voice was sharp, and the girl looked up in surprise. Dark tumbled hair, dark eyes like Ava's, wide cheekbones, pointed chin, an emerald shift barely covering her—they could have been sisters except for the hair, and the quick heartbeat. I remembered what Urs has said about the mortal Ava had picked up the night before, and damned the child's sense of timing.

"I told you to wait for me," Ava was saying, her voice tight and angry as she glanced from Nick to the girl, then walked over to smooth the mortal's hair, her arm around her possessively. Kendra looked uncertain, then smiled at Nick.

"He's cute . . . is he a surprise? For me?"

"No. Go back to bed, I'll be there in a second."

"You'll have to leave her here." Nick looked angry, and I wasn't sure, but I could guess why. Ava had probably already replaced Marcus Grimaldi with Kendra as her latest thrall, which made most of her previous words to Nick specious at best. From where Nick stood it would be possible to see if they were connected, although not from where Vachon and I watched the scene.

"No." Ava's voice was quiet but definite, and she placed a kiss on Kendra's temple. "She's mine. If I go, she goes."

"I won't allow that," Nick's voice was hardening, and his stance became defensive.

"*You* have no say in it." Ava's voice cracked out like a shot. "I will have something to take with me when I leave. Compensation, for giving up this life. Don't try to stop me—you won't like the results, *Detective* Knight." Her smile was poisonous, her eyes glittering. "There are so many things I could do on my way out of town that you'd regret."

Enough was enough. I walked over to one of the glass doors, broke the catch, and slid it back with a bang. All three heads whipped in my direction. I could feel the change come over me, as fast as thought: the fangs dropping, the sight changing, the bloodlust running through my body. "Ava Malenkov," I hissed, and felt my mouth draw back in the parody of a smile. "You are charged with violations of the Code—"

"No!" Nick stood between her and me, his face full of anger and sadness as he tried to shield my prey. "Morgan, don't do this, please, this isn't necessary! Think about what you are—"

"This is precisely what I am." I shook my head slowly, not even able to regret that he was seeing the truth. "This is what I always was, even before I was brought across. Don't stand in my way, Nick." With that, I rushed Ava Malenkov, pushing her away from the mortal, sending both of us flying across the room to slam into the back wall. I was vaguely aware of Vachon entering the room, but all my attention was centered on the woman imprisoned by my hands. "For exposing the Community to danger in murdering Nora Quentin and Marcus Grimaldi you must die. Give yourself up, and you will die easily. Resist, and it will be as painful as you can imagine."

She stared at me for an entire second, then smiled, her eyes shifting from black to yellow to red within instants as she hissed a response, going for my neck. I threw her away from me, sending her crashing into the glass coffee table, then flew to pin her down. Lacroix had been right: she was mad. Mad with arrogance, mad with recklessness, and strong because of both—as I tried to enter her mind I was repulsed by a wave of pride and rage too strong to cut through. Ava Malenkov rose to meet me, grappling with me as we each tried to gain the ascendancy. We slammed back and forth across the room, sending mirrors and pictures flying in our fight, scratching, biting, kicking, and punching as we tried to kill each other. Both of us were moving too fast to get a grip and gain an advantage. It's not for nothing that Enforcers usually work in pairs. I almost regretted leaving Patrick behind in Denver, despite our differences. Lacroix might have been right about Malenkov being too difficult for me to handle alone . . .

At some point I saw Nick and Kendra crouched down near the wall, Nick trying to protect the mortal from the flying debris. If I moved the fight outside, there might be a chance he'd be able to get her out of there—

My train of thought was derailed as Vachon leaped on Malenkov's back, pulling her back to sink his teeth into her throat. Ava kicked me in the stomach, twisting around to grab Vachon by the throat and flip him over her shoulder and into the bar. I snarled and body-slammed her into the ceiling as glasses and bottled shattered around the younger vampire. The carpet was smoking where we'd knocked over the candles, and a fine spray of dark blood stained most of the furniture and walls.

Nick was trying to drag Kendra out of the condo, but the mortal seemed to be frozen in place. As I rose to butt my head into Ava's stomach, I thought the squeal of pain she gave was because of actual damage. I should have paid more attention.

I fought to keep her fingers from closing around my throat, whirling around the room in a spiral that slammed us into first the floor, and then the fireplace. I saw Nick pulling Kendra toward the door. Concentrating with all my strength, I pulled Ava's fingers back one by one, then bent back her wrists with satisfaction as I heard the bones snap. She screamed, then bashed her head into mine. Enraged, I bit into her neck, trying to suck enough blood out of her to weaken her—

Another scream, but it wasn't Ava's. Nick. I lifted my head to see him collapse to his knees, a broken part of a picture frame impaling him below his heart. "No," I whispered, horror snapping me out of my blood-rage for a second. "Nick—"

Vachon was kneeling next to him, his face full of concern. Kendra was frozen in place . . . Kendra. Ava had made Kendra stake Nick, controlling her so that she moved too fast for Nick to see when he tried to remove the mortal from the room—

Another snap as something broke. My arm. I hadn't even noticed that Ava had broken my hold, one of her wrists healing already as she kicked me under the chin, sending me sprawling back into the couch. I snarled. Blood-lust surged through me again, and I screamed out my fury as I flew toward Ava, both of us somersaulting through the partially open balcony doors and out over the city with the momentum.

"Damn you!" I screamed out. "Damn you damn you damn you—" She was laughing, blood running down her neck, unintimidated by my rage as we flew upward into the starry night.

"I will not be the only one to lose something precious tonight," she taunted me as we grappled. "I won't be the only one to die."

"Yes. You. Will." I reversed our trajectory suddenly, taking us down toward the ground from over fifty stories up. Faster and faster we plunged toward the ground, spinning around each other as we fought. She was trying to pull me close, to bite me, but I kept my arms rigid, held her away as we sped down toward the street. Too late, she realized what I was trying to do.

You can not kill a vampire by breaking their neck. But you can immobilize them. As we hit the pavement, I heard the beautiful sound of her neck cracking as she slammed into the concrete of the parking lot. We rolled for a moment, our speed carrying us over the ground like stones skipping across a lake.

Ava Malenkov looked up into my eyes, all hilarity gone. Terrified, her eyes wide and human again, her mouth moving soundlessly. I rejoiced in it, thought of Nick in her condo, dying maybe, and smiled. "Sentence is carried out," I whispered, then brought my hand down on her neck, severing her head from her body. Blood sprayed everywhere, covering me for a few short seconds, then her corpse dissolved to soft ash in my hands, sticking to the blood on my clothes. I panted harshly, shuddering in the aftermath. The scent of blood was everywhere, but it was vampire blood, not human. I returned to my normal self, no longer enraged, no longer simply an Enforcer.

Nick. Oh, God . . .

Soaring upward, I prayed that he was still alive, that nothing vital had been damaged when Kendra staked him, that Vachon was helping him—I don't know who I pray to anymore, or if they listen since I changed. I just send a thought out to the stars and hope that someone listens.

The scene that greeted my eyes in the condo was pure chaos. Tracy had arrived while I fought Ava, and she was bending over Nick, crying and cursing, as Vachon held an unconscious Kendra. At my entrance Tracy whipped a crucifix in my direction, stopping me from getting any closer.

"It's me," I snapped, flinching away from the cross. I don't believe in the fairytales about vampires being pure evil, but there's something about a human with a cross, and the faith to use it, that repels us. It's uncomfortable but manageable for me—impossible for some of the older Enforcers. "Put that thing down." She didn't drop it, her blue eyes accusing as she placed herself between me and Nick. "Damn you, let me help him!"

"This is your fault," she said, tears welling up, but her mouth set in a thin line. "You should have protected him—"

"He shouldn't have been here!" Guilt washed over her face as I came closer. "I tried . . . please, Tracy. Let me help. I can—"

"NO!" She stood up, the cross held out like a gun. Vachon watched us from behind her, his face a mask of indifference, but his eyes burning with something I didn't understand. "I won't let you make him one of you! I won't let you make that choice for him!"

I gasped, surprised, almost laughing. "I won't. I promise."

Tracy snorted, and Vachon suddenly spoke up. "Trace. Let her help."

Uncertainty, stubbornness, anger—a million emotions moved across her face—then her arms dropped. Furious, she turned around to confront Vachon. "Why did you *do* that? She'll kill him!"

"She won't." Vachon met my eyes, his arms shifting to accommodate the weight of Ava's former thrall. "Enforcers aren't allowed to. She can get him to a doctor fast enough to save him. Let her help him." He knew I could remove the broken frame at that moment, but Tracy would realize Nick was a vampire if I did. I realized something as I stared down at my friend lying at her feet, blood pooling beneath him. The frame could be removed, but he was already in danger of the True Death—and taking the stake out would only lead to Nick losing more blood than he could afford. I didn't have the time to argue with this child—

Tracy Vetter's hands tightened around the cross. She stared at me, resolve hardening her face into something older than herself, a stone mask of determination. "Do it. Take him. But I swear, if you hurt him—If he—If he suffers for one minute more than necessary—I will *find* you. I promise."

I bent to pick up Nick, and saw that his face was already whitening, lines appearing around his eyes. He was so still. Shaking, I idly noticed that I was hurt, too, but it wasn't important. I had to get Nick help. I had to save him. I had to. Somewhere inside me was a crying little girl.

Standing a moment on the balcony, I tried to think clearly. Where would be safe? Where would I be able to get blood quickly? The Raven—but that would mean Lacroix. No. No way was I going to put myself, or more importantly, Nick, in Lacroix's debt. Which left only one place to go.

I stepped into the darkness toward the Toronto County Morgue, clutching Nick to me as if my life depended on it.

25

Thursday morning, 12:02 AM

I'm no EMT. But I am an expert in Vampire First Aid. A good thing, too, because Nick has all the survival instincts of a lemming on some nights. He regularly gets shot, stabbed, bludgeoned and singed by sunlight. Most of the time my efforts center around explaining why there isn't *more* damage to his concerned superiors, with the occasional bullet excavation thrown in for flavor. Tonight was not one of those nights, though.

Midnight in the morgue—not exactly a busy time, but it's no tomb either. Which was only one reason why I was so panicky when Morgana came through the outer doors with Nick cradled in her arms, looking like a cross between the Pieta by Michelangelo and the end of one of those *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies. "You've got to help," Morgana was saying as she put Nick on one of the tables, but I didn't even look at her, or hear her, because Nick, my Nick, dammit, had a piece of wood through his chest, and his skin was going papery-thin and transparent white as I watched, his lips blackening and his arms stiffening and his eyes were closed and for one second I wanted to screech, but then my emotions were cut off when I saw he was breathing. Breathing. Still alive. Not ashes like Richard, so there was a chance. Hope.

I rolled him onto his side as gently as I could, and ordered Morgana to rip the jacket off him so I could get a better look at the damage. Expensive leather shredded away—Nick will make me pay for *that*, I thought in passing—to reveal a scene from one of my more memorable nightmares. The jagged stick of wood had pushed through his torso from the back, beneath his heart, between the ribs. His shirt was drenched with blood, and as he breathed I could hear a faint bubbling sound. A little froth of blood was on Nick's mouth, and he coughed softly as he inhaled. The stake was through his lung. He'd keep losing blood, and in a human it would be bad enough, but wood does weird things to vampire immune systems, so there was no way Nick would recover unless we got that hunk of wood out of him.

I ran back to the cooler—I could hear Morgana cursing in the next room, in English and in Spanish—and came back with a handful of the blood bags we keep for emergencies, and some tubing and needles. I set up three bags to empty into Nick when I hit the shunts, then turned to the other vampire.

She was a mess, about as non-sterile as anyone could be. Thank God vampires don't get infections, or she'd have given Nick tetanus and who knows what else. "You have to get that thing out of his chest. Snap off the part sticking through his abdomen as cleanly as you can, then pull it out from the back." I was strapping Nick down to the table as I talked; it wouldn't have stopped him in his normal state, but in the shape he was in at that moment, I needed to keep him immobile and he couldn't fight hard enough to break the restraints.

Morgana stared at me, and there was horror on her face as she looked back at Nick.

"Are you paying attention?" A quick jerk of her head confirmed that she was still with me, and I grabbed some padding, bandages and alcohol from the medicine cabinet, and handed her a handful of padding after I soaked it with alcohol. "I don't want that thing to splinter, the last thing he needs is wood in the wound. As soon as you have it out, stuff this in the hole. Hard. Pack it as tight as possible, we don't want him to lose any more blood."

Morgana nodded again, seeming calmer, but still looking strung out. "Hold him steady," she whispered, placing her hands around the front of the stake. A quick snap, close to his chest, and part of the pressure on his chest eased, sending a small spray of blood in the air. I packed the cotton tight, taped it down, and then smoothed back the hair from Nick's face. So pale, so old—I held him steady as Morgana removed the stake from his back in one smooth movement. More blood, blood he couldn't afford to lose . . . Both Morgana and I packed the wound, and I hit the shunts on the IVs and blood began to pour back into his body. I heard a sound outside the door, and gestured to the locker. "Get him in there, someone's coming." We pushed the table into the locker, and I just had enough time to dispose of the bloody rags, stake, and my jacket before one of my assistants, Allen Lee, came in.

"Hey, Dr. Lambert, how's it going?"

Would that I could've answered this honestly. Just once. Just to see the look on someone's face. "Oh, I've been doing impromptu surgery on Nick Knight, removing a stake through his chest, and the woman who brought him in wants to kill me. How's it with you?"

I spent the next fifteen minutes talking shop, discussing the results on some of the analyses he'd been doing, and laughing at his new joke (". . . and then the bartender says, 'You're a mean drunk, Superman.'") all the while wondering if Nick were okay. Grace would've known something was wrong, and would've tried to worm it out of me, but Allen is still too new to know when I'm upset, or to presume to ask me personal questions. Finally, after a completely surreal quarter hour, Allen waved cheerily and left my office. I took a second to compose myself, then grabbed two more blood bags from the fridge. Hiding in the locker among the corpses were two vampires, one critically injured, one contemplating killing me the last I'd heard.

And there's some who think I don't meet interesting people in my job.

Nick looked significantly better, even if he was still unconscious. The last time he'd looked even close to that bad, he'd been starving himself for three days and then got beat up by Lacroix and inhaled smoke from the fire in his loft. Schanke gave his blood that time . . . He teased Nick about it for weeks afterward. A wave of sadness hit me. We used to have so much fun teasing Schanke about his diets, and smoking, and how weird he thought Nick was, and he'd give us grief right back. It's only been a month. I'm not used to not seeing him in the halls, or hearing his terrible jokes anymore.

I'm definitely not used to Tracy yet, and how much she knows about the vampires. I keep having to stop myself from making jokes she might understand. Schanke never got them, but she might. It's strange . . . I'd like to talk to her about them, but Nick would go ballistic, so it's not an option. I stood next to the gurney and trailed my fingers along his jaw, feeling for a nonexistent pulse, and noticed that his skin tone was better, and he seemed to be breathing easier. Morgana had placed her jacket around his shoulders. When I lifted it, I couldn't see any fresh blood staining the bandages. He was going to be okay. Some part of me had never doubted it, but I was incredibly relieved to have been right.

"He's a lot better," Morgana whispered. She was leaning back against the lockers, and I got a good look at her outfit for the first time. Leather and lace, and an exotic print bra, with her hair spiked and moussed. Covered in blood—the smell was very strong. There seemed to be a layer of dust or dirt sticking to the blood in odd patterns around her hands and arms. Her mascara was smeared, and she had fading cuts and bruises around her neck. I handed her one of the blood bags, then changed the other with one of the empties hooked up to Nick.

"What happened? And where's Tracy?" It was the first time I'd even thought to ask.

"I took out our murderer, and Nick got hurt while trying to protect a bystander. Tracy's probably still back there, cleaning up the mess." She opened the slot in the blood bag and greedily sucked out half the contents, stopping to wipe her mouth after a minute. "The killer had a mortal she picked up at the Raven trapped in a thrall bond, and the girl staked Nick when he tried to get her out of the condo. Just like always . . . He tries to keep the innocent from getting hurt, and gets burned himself." She rubbed wearily at her eyes, then let her arm drop to her side. "By the way. My name is Morgana."

"Natalie Lambert." I felt a smile tug at the edges of my mouth. "Although I think you already know that."

She shrugged, glancing down at Nick as I unhooked some of the tubing. I should have been scared of her—Nick had said she was planning on killing me after the murderer was found—but I couldn't manage it. I was too glad that he was alive to worry about myself yet. A thought struck me.

"Why didn't you go to Lacroix for help with Nick?" An undefinable series of emotions flowed across her face as she studied our friend instead of looking at me, but I thought that the clearest feeling I detected was distrust. "You don't like him either?"

"You've met him?" She seemed shocked, her gaze suddenly back on my face. "I thought . . ." Her voice trailed off and she shook her head, looking confused.

"Once. Once was enough."

Morgana smiled, then laughed softly, almost unwillingly. She leaned back, and winced as something twinged and took another sip from the bag. "I don't know what I expected from you, but it wasn't this. You're so . . . calm. Unshockable. Like it's all normal to you."

"I'm used to surprises by now. And while Nick has tried to soft-pedal some things about you guys, Janette never pulled any punches."

"You know about Janette, too." She was staring at Nick again, her eyes wide in the dim light provided by the 60-watt bulb. "Did Nick just introduce you to her, saying he wanted you to meet his friends, or what?"

"Close enough." I pulled the jacket closer around Nick, wishing I had blankets or something to keep him warm. No such luck. I took a step backward, studying Morgana. Nick had said she didn't know what she wanted to do about me yet. Time to give her some suggestions. "Nick said you were thinking about killing me. Or bringing me across." Her head snapped up to look at me. Her eyes weren't glowing gold, but there was that hint of danger that Nick gets before he does something violent. "Don't. I won't give away your secrets. I care about Nick too much to put him in danger. And—" I took a deep breath, and smiled ironically "—I have an insurance policy. Information on Nick and your Community is hidden in several different places, and will be made public if I go 'missing' or die under strange circumstances."

Morgana was still, silent, just watching me like a bug on a slide. I sighed in frustration, certain that she wasn't listening to me, not really. "I'm no threat to you. But I don't want to become one of you."

"You aren't a threat?" The vampire standing across the gurney from me laughed without humor. "You've got four years of medical information on Nick stashed somewhere, you want to blackmail me into leaving you alone, and you don't even realize what kind of danger you are. That information is a time bomb. Killing you might be out of the question, but I should probably bring you over, or have Nick do it. Then the problem would be completely solved."

"Why aren't I afraid you will?" I still wasn't. Maybe it was shock. Maybe the whole ordeal of the evening would hit me when I got in my own bed in the morning. But I couldn't work up the energy to be frightened of someone who'd looked at Nick with so much pain and concern.

"I have no idea why you're not absolutely terrified. I thought Tracy Vetter was a piece of work, but you . . . Maybe you're just crazy," Morgana muttered under her breath.

"You'd really kill someone who helped you save Nick's life? The friend who you owe *your* life to?"

"He told you about that." A slight touch of resentment entered her voice at that, but the look she gave Nick was untainted gratitude, and a tenderness I wouldn't have thought one of Nick's Enforcers would be capable of. She closed her eyes, then turned her back on both me and Nick. "Bringing you over isn't the same as killing you."

"It would be the same for me." If I ever have to make that choice, I know what it's going to be. I won't end up like Richard. I had my opportunity to be truly stupid last year, during the meteor scare, and I got a second chance when Nick stopped me. And I don't make the same mistakes twice.

Morgana turned back around, leaning on the gurney. Her dark green eyes were wide, blood-red lips thinned into a line. "Maybe it would be, at that." Morgana's face was expressionless, but her hand shook as she raised the blood bag to her mouth and took another sip. "You've been covering for him, haven't you? And the rest of the Community—Janette, Lacroix, the others? Any murders that come up just get classified weird, and then you tell Nick."

I was a little taken aback at how much she'd figured out. How much *did* I tell her exactly, when she hypnotized me? And was it only last night? "Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know," I wanted to say. "Maybe it's the Oath again. Maybe it's wanting to prevent the kind of hysteria that happened when the meteor was supposed to hit. It's partly because of Nick, yes, but . . . it's more complex."

They're my mystery; no one else knows about them, except Tracy, and compared to what I know about vampires, she's just a novice. Sometimes the secrets get to be too much to bear, and it's hard to manage my life and the overlapping world that Nick lives in. But other times—I know something else no one else does. My worst nightmare is not Nick dead, but Nick gone, disappeared as if he never was, and taking all the rest of his kind with him in the middle of the night, along with four years of my life. As hard as I look for his cure, and even though I want him to become human with a desperation that scares me when I'm alone, I don't want them to have never existed. And that's what it feels like would happen if I didn't do what I do. Cover up. Lie. Pretend. So they can still exist.

"Because someone has to, I guess." I shrugged, looking down at Nick. He almost looked okay, like he does when he's just sleeping. "Otherwise it would all be chaos. You Enforcers don't always get here in time, do you?"

Morgana raised one eyebrow in speculation, then looked back at Nick as he made some small sound, struggling to move against the restraints. "I have some things to take care of . . . Tracy and Vachon, for starters." She pushed a hand through her hair, and grimaced in tiredness. "Don't tell Nick, but I think . . . maybe . . . I can get you a dispensation, an exclusion from the Code. If I'm wrong—if you don't hear from me within a day or two—run. Run away as far as you can, Natalie Lambert. If you get far enough fast enough, they won't bother to keep looking for you after a while." I stood, rooted in shock, as she opened the door to the main examining room. She turned back, bent down and gave Nick a fast kiss on his forehead. "Take care of him."

"I always do."

She smiled in response, then was gone.

Nick was blinking awake now, eyelashes too long for any guy fluttering on his cheeks. I think I was grinning like an idiot, because he gave me a confused look as he came to full consciousness. "Nat?"

I leaned over and kissed him gently on the mouth. Maybe it was too soon to be hoping. But you can't be frightened all the time. "Welcome back. How do you feel?"

"Terrible. Tired." His eyelids drifted down to half-mast, and then he mumbled, "I thought I heard Morgana. I thought she was here . . . Have to tell her not to hurt you."

"It can wait."

"No, it's too important—"

"She isn't here." I bit my lips, then said softly, "Go back to sleep, Nick. Nothing's going to happen for a while. I won't leave. I promise."

"Can't promise," he whispered, clasping my hand, holding on tight. "No promises."

"Then just believe me, okay?"

"Okay." He smiled sweetly at me, the choirboy smile that stops my breath. "Lovely Nat . . ." He drifted off again before he could finish what he was going to say.

I held his hand for a long time before I went back to my desk to call in sick. I wondered what story Tracy and Vachon had come up with to cover the events at the murderer's condo. I wondered why Morgana had changed her mind—if helping her with Nick's injury had made the difference, or my confession about the cover-ups had done it. I wondered where Lacroix was, and why he hadn't known Nick was hurt.

Then I got up from my desk, and got the keys to my car. Later. All of that could wait. Time to get Nick home. To watch over him, make sure he didn't have a relapse, and be prepared for the worst in case Morgana's plan failed. And to just have the time alone without a crisis hanging over our heads. There was nothing else I could do to protect him or myself.

Make the most of what you've got, Natalie, I thought . . . *Who knows how much longer you'll have it.*

26

Thursday morning, 12:02 AM

I was still shaking when Morgana stepped off the balcony with Nick in her arms. If I had told Nick what we were dealing with from the beginning, would he have been more careful? Would he be dying if I'd told him the truth? God—

It isn't your fault.

Yes, it is. I turned to Vachon, who was still cradling Ava Malenkov's latest pick-up in his arms. **He's my partner. My responsibility.**

"If anyone is at fault, it's Malenkov," the vampire said aloud. "Or Morgana Harte. You did your job, you kept all the secrets, and you even told her what was going on—and another mortal got hurt anyway." He glanced down at the brunette, still asleep or unconscious. "We've got to get her out of here . . . *and cover up what happened.*"

His speech trailed into thoughts he didn't bother to hide from me, and I clung to his confidence, his unstated certainty that Nick would be all right. And . . . I reached for him with my mind, seeking comfort, trying to make sense of what had just occurred. He reached back—warmth, solidity, like the touch of a hand on my cheek, or an arm around my shoulder. Vachon didn't run away. Part of him was still separate, but what was there, was there because of me, to comfort and help me. I was the one who broke the contact this time, seguing from thoughts to words. **How do we cover this up . . . there's no way to do it unless—** "—we set fire to the place."

Vachon nodded judiciously. "Those candles . . . Shouldn't be too hard to relight them. And the alcohol that got knocked over should help spread it . . ." He frowned, shifted the girl and muttered, "Deja vu all over again."

Part of me couldn't believe I was contemplating ruining a crime scene. But the larger part of me knew that any analysis of the condominium wouldn't make sense to the forensics guys anyway, and since Ava Malenkov had to be dead (didn't she?) there was no sense in pursuing the trail. Nick and I (*if* he recovers, I thought) would be able to attribute the murders to the mysterious woman who disappeared the night we came to question her. Another question struck me. **How much did Nick see? Or hear?**

Who knows? When we got here, he was on his way out . . . and then Sleeping Beauty came out of the bedroom, and all hell broke loose. Vachon was hiding something from me again. I vowed to call him on it—later. **Here.** He handed the girl to me, sending me staggering as I tried to hold her.

Why are you giving her to me?

So you can get her out of here. We don't have time for this, Trace . . . I'll set the fire and leave by the balcony. Tell the cops that she came out and reported the fire to you, and told you her friend was still up here. And that you couldn't go back into the place. That should cover most of the bases. Now will you go? We don't have much time if we're going to get away with this—

Fine, but you owe me some answers later. I slung the girl over my shoulder in a fireman's carry and turned toward the exit.

Give it four minutes before you pull the fire alarm. Most of this place should be ashes and smoke by then.

Deliberately, I forced myself to talk out loud. "Okay, okay . . . Just make it good, Vachon. We don't want any evidence that we were here. I can't believe I just said that . . ." His soft laughter followed me out into the carpeted hallway. The door swung shut behind me, and I walked toward the elevator, still feeling like I was in a dream. Unreal, doing things that had no relation to common sense. I pushed the DOWN elevator button and checked my watch. Four minutes. One gone already.

By the time I got to the first floor, the next-floor alarms were going off and the girl was awake, shaking, scared . . . and she didn't remember a thing after falling asleep in Ava Malenkov's bed. Vachon must have wiped the last few minutes out of her mind while I tried to help Nick—zapped into oblivion the memory of her trying to kill my partner. I flashed on how Nick had looked when I'd entered the living room, barely breathing, his face twisted in pain—

Concentrate, Trace. Concentrate on what you're going to tell the fire captain, and your superiors, and Nick. Don't think about what happened in the penthouse. Vachon's voice again, quiet, close. He could have been in the elevator with me. The doors opened. **I'm done, the place is a mess. You can call the authorities now.**

"Oh, God, Ava—" The girl stabbed at the buttons on the elevator, trying to make it go up. I caught her hands, and put my arm around her, telling myself it wasn't her fault she'd hurt Nick, that she didn't know what happened to the murderer. It didn't help. I still wanted to shake some sense into her. Didn't she know what kind of danger she'd been in? Or didn't she care? What kind of person flirts with that kind of death?

"Listen to me. Listen to me!" I raised my voice. She was still shivering, as much from cold as from shock, I think. That shift didn't cover much. "We can't go back up there. The place is on fire. I'm sure she got out . . . What's your name?"

"Kendra," she mumbled. "Who are you?"

"Don't you remember?" Twinges of conscience almost completely suppressed now, I told her the story. She seemed to believe it, to think that there was a fire in the penthouse, that her friend was still trapped up there, and her shell-shocked behavior went far towards convincing the building super.

The next three hours were chaos. They managed to contain the fire to the penthouse—one small mercy in the middle of that night—and I answered the fire captain's questions easily, saying "I don't know" where I would have had to lie. (Where's the owner? How did it start? Why was this girl there?) I managed to keep it together until I talked to Captain Reese on the cellphone.

"Where's Knight?"

"I don't . . . know." *What am I doing?* I thought. *I can't do this. I can't keep this up. I have to tell someone what's going on.*

"You don't know? Wasn't he there when you arrived?"

"Sorry, captain, I haven't seen him." Which was shaving the truth so close as to cut it. Cuts. Blood. Nick. *I can't handle this. I can't do this by myself. I can't . . .*

You have to.

Vachon! I was crying, barely keeping the tears out of my voice as I talked to my boss. "I'm sure he's fine. He must have left before I got here." **I have to tell him, I can't do this alone anymore.**

You're not alone. You're never alone. Calm flooded me. That steady, purposeful voice bolstered something inside, gave me enough strength to finish the conversation with Reese. "I'll go to the Raven after I'm through here . . . I think he might be checking up on a lead there."

"Homing beacons. I'm going to give you two homing beacons if you can't keep track of each other," Reese grumbled as he said good-bye. I automatically checked out with the fire marshal as I left, and sleepwalked to my car.

Go home and get some rest.

No. I started the car, and pointed it in the other direction from home. **Where did she take Nick?**

A pause. **I don't know. I thought they'd be at the Raven, but I'm there now, and . . .** A mental sigh. **Look, let me deal with her. You're completely exhausted.**

NO. She'll find us eventually. And now that the killer is dead . . . She is dead, right?

Oh, yeah. I'd say that's a given. I heard something die out there . . . and Morgana Harte is still walking around.

Well, now I want to ask Miss Morgana Harte to let us go. It's the best time. The only time. Besides . . . I said the next out loud, "She owes me. For Nick."

❑❑❑❑❑

She was waiting for us at the top of the church steps.

The Enforcer had changed out of her punk/Goth wear, which had been covered with blood and gore the last time I saw her. No makeup; sweater, jeans, leather jacket, her hair loose . . . She looked like a grad student. I wondered what she'd been when she became a vampire, and how long ago. She certainly mimicked humanity better than Vachon did. Except when there was no sign of it at all.

"Nick's fine," she said quietly as Vachon and I approached. "And Ava Malenkov is very dead." I gulped in a huge breath of air, then started crying. I didn't want to, but it was such a huge relief, so unexpected, that I couldn't stop myself. I sat down on the steps and let it all out. Javier held my hand as I cried against his shoulder. When I finally had a grip on myself, I smiled at him and thought, **Thanks.**

Don't mention it. Really.

I grinned, then turned to look at Morgana. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." She slipped down a few steps, until she was sitting across from me and Vachon. "I know some people . . . who are into some experiments." She avoided my eyes, watching the street and the almost nonexistent traffic. "They owed me a favor. He won't even have a scar. Or any aftereffects. Just accept it, and don't remind him of it. Or he'll be in as much trouble as you were." Morgana shifted her weight, her chin going up defensively. "How did it go after I left?"

"Flames. General destruction. The kid's with the paramedics. Tracy made it seem like Kendra woke up out in the living room, panicked, and ran into her in the hall." Vachon dropped my hand. "I wiped her memory. She doesn't remember a thing after waking up in Malenkov's bed."

"Convenient," Morgana whispered, nodding. She looked me full in the face. "Nick doesn't remember anything after his interview with Ms. Malenkov. And he won't remember, either. I told him he's coming down with the flu, that he got dizzy and collapsed at my place."

"He'll probably think I gave it to him," I commented. "The fire marshal pretty much decided it was an accident from what I told him. Alcohol and cigarettes . . . If anyone ever finds out . . ." *My career is dead, my father will kill me, and I might go to jail,* I thought but didn't say. Something about the thought of those 'experiments' bothered me, but I couldn't bring it to the front of my mind. No scar? What kind of treatment can do that? And how could she make Nick forget what he'd seen? This wasn't just flying people and bombs going off—he'd been hurt . . .

"Is there anything left?" Morgana questioned.

Vachon mouthed a "no" at her, his eyes mocking.

"Except for us," I said, taking Vachon's hand in mine again. He tensed, and I could feel that thread of fear, but behind it was resignation, and respect. **I'll back you, Trace. But don't be too disappointed if it doesn't work.**

"We found the killer. We helped cover her trail. If you hadn't been there, we would have taken her out," I said, paused for breath, then rushed on, "We want to be free of this . . . thrall thing. Haven't we proven we can be trusted?"

She just stared at me.

"What is it going to take? You nearly got my partner *killed*! You owe me!"

"I *owe* you?" Morgana started laughing, then couldn't seem to stop, holding her stomach like it hurt. I seethed quietly while Vachon thought, **Don't. Let her laugh. Don't push her,** at me. When the Enforcer had quieted down, she muttered, "I *owe* you. I don't owe you a thing." She bit her lip, then added, "Nick is my friend too, you know. Seeing him get hurt like that . . . scared me." Quietly, she added, "If Malenkov hadn't enthralled Kendra, he wouldn't have gotten hurt."

"What are you saying?" I pounced on the opening, hoping it meant what I thought it did.

"You trust me, don't you?" I blinked at the non sequitur. Morgana was staring off into the distance again. "You believed me when I said Nick was fine. And you did come to me when the murders started . . . even though you didn't stay out of the investigation like I told you to."

"I guess. I hadn't really thought about it." And when I thought of Nick being fine—other things, odd things occurred to me, like Nick and Morgana's friendship, and how reluctant he had been to discuss her. Vachon and Morgana's referring to a 'mutual friend' who he had informed of her actions toward us. How even though Nick walked into Garibaldi's house before Morgana left, he was still unable to identify her . . . or had he been unable to?

"Why do you trust me?"

I glanced at Vachon, but he was no help. He just smiled and shook his head. **You're on your own, Trace.**

"Because . . ." I stumbled, then went on, "I think you're doing what you have to. And you care about Nick. I don't *like* you," I clarified. "You beat up Vachon when you lost your temper. You're really rude. Condescending." I thought about it, then slowly continued. "But you seem to care about what happens to your people, and maybe about justice, too. You could have let Ava Malenkov go, but you didn't. That's why. You did the right thing." And whatever her relationship with Nick, that was the truth.

Morgana and I looked at each other a moment, then she said, quietly, "Yes. You can be free. If you still want to."

If . . . **Vachon?**

Let's see if there's strings attached.

"Are there any conditions to this?" I asked carefully, ignoring the turmoil her words had set off inside my head. *Did* I want to be free now? I was starting to get used to having him there all the time. But . . . there'd been that moment in the condo, when he'd forced my arms down, turned the crucifix away from Morgana. Not that he'd do that often. Or ever again, maybe. But still . . . I've worked too hard to be my own person. Far too hard. And it would be so easy to just be with Vachon, say that we had no control over what happened to us—

No. Never. I can trust him, but I don't want to be trapping him. I don't want to be tied to him. If he wants to leave someday, I don't want to have to follow him, like some puppy. Maybe I know more about him, and the risks now, maybe I understand too much of what I've seen over the last week . . . or not enough.

And what did Vachon feel? Impossible to tell. There was a stone wall in front of his emotions. But his hand felt very cold in mine.

"No conditions." She stood up, brushing off the seat of her jeans, a casual gesture that disoriented me with its normality. Morgana met my eyes. "Let's just say that we have enough in common that I think I *can* trust you. Which doesn't mean the Others won't disagree with me." I could hear the capital letter she put on "others", and started getting worried again.

But she was still talking. "Nick will be able to go back to work on Monday. If you haven't heard from me by then, you won't hear from me at all. I suggest that you run if that happens." She walked down the last few steps, glancing back at us when she reached the bottom. "It's your choice." Then she smiled, and I could almost see why Nick was friends with her; remembered her books, and how I'd liked her the first time we met. "Whichever way it turns out, I don't think we'll meet again, Detective Vetter. But I'll see you around." A gust of air, and she was gone, up into the fading night sky.

"But you won't see her, of course," Vachon said dryly.

I shook my head. "It can't be that easy."

"Tracy." I looked at him, fell into his eyes—

—tearing, pulling me apart—

—dimming my vision—

—loss of something familiar, an ache that wasn't there before—

—pain—

Finished. Separate. Gone.

"Why did you do that?" I asked. He'd stood up, moved away from me, up the stairs toward his home.

"Sometimes you make things too complicated, Tracy," he said lightly. "I don't like being forced to do anything. Morgana just gave us an out, and I took it. End of story."

I trembled, fighting the ache where he'd been, the loss of the closeness and trust. "Just like that."

"Yeah." He was watching me, trying to guess how I was feeling. I couldn't begin to imagine what he was thinking . . . No, wait. I could. That expression, the blank stare—he was confused. He'd acted on impulse. I knew him well enough now to be sure of that much, at least. Maybe I wasn't the only one that was scared by too many choices.

"It has to be like this," I whispered. "But I wish . . ." He leaned forward, and I couldn't hold his gaze. I looked away, not wanting to know if he missed me. Would miss the sense of connection. If he did, I might have asked or said something stupid. I stood up, straightened my jacket and checked my watch. "The sun rises in half an hour. You'd better get inside."

"Tracy." Old, old eyes; and an emotion in their depths that wasn't friendship or amusement or tolerance. "Someday we're going to talk about this again." I nodded, didn't let myself look away. "When we do, it'll be when we want to. Not because we have to. And when that day comes, you'll already know what you want." He laughed suddenly, that soft chuckle and amused expression making him twenty-five again. "With luck, maybe I'll know, too."

The hurt inside me didn't ache now. Timing is everything . . . When I know him better, maybe I'll be able to make a choice. Not now. It's too soon. Smiling, I started to turn away, but he caught my hand. A shard of my dream came to me: Javier kissing my palm, asking me what I wanted. Now he lifted my hand to his lips, and gave me a soft kiss on the knuckles. "You done good, Trace."

I was blushing, I could tell. "I had good back-up. Makes all the difference in the world." I reluctantly pulled my fingers away, then softly said, "Thanks for being there. For not bailing on me."

"The thought never entered my head."

Laughing, I bounced down the last few steps to the street. "Say good morning, Vachon."

"Good morning, Vachon. Sleep tight, Tracy." A soft chuckle came from the doorway of the church.

"Soon. Not yet." When I turned around, he was already gone inside. Birds were starting up, streetlights flickering out and dying. I wished Nick were with me, to tell . . . what? That I'd handled something big, something awful, and it had almost turned out okay?

That I knew he knew about Vachon. And vampires. And hadn't told me—had tried to protect me? I smiled. Some time, I'll have to tell him that I know what he knows. That he doesn't have to protect me anymore. Maybe we'll really be partners, then.

I still don't know what I could have done differently.

But I almost feel like I can tread water now, in this dark world I've found. If I do what I have to without looking back—if I'm right, and Vachon will help when I need it—maybe I'll learn to swim someday.

27

Thursday morning, 6:15 AM

Happy endings all around. Except for those of us who haven't learned our lessons yet.

Back on my roof again, watching the horizon. Maybe half an hour. Maybe twenty minutes or so. It doesn't matter. It would just make it easier, if They decided to give me an order I couldn't obey. All I'd have to do would be to wait.

I thought back, past the encounter with Detective Vetter and Javier Vachon, past my leave-taking from Nick and Natalie Lambert at the morgue, to the moment when Lacroix showed up in the storage room while I watched Nick slowly regain color and life. I'd already given him some of my blood when the coroner left the room. I hadn't wanted Dr. Lambert to know about that aspect of our biology, that a blood transfer between vampires sometimes helps speed healing. She knew too much already. I looked up from Nick to find his master standing next to the gurney, Lacroix's furious gaze moving from his unconscious son to me and back again. "How?" he whispered. I flinched. Oh, I was in trouble now . . .

"Ava's thrall got in a lucky shot."

His mouth drew back in a soundless snarl. "I assume she's dead."

"Malenkov? Yes."

"And the thrall."

"No." Lacroix glared at me, incomprehension plain on his face. "It wasn't her fault. And it would be an added complication to kill her. She won't remember anything after I'm done with her, anyway."

"Soft," he hissed at me. "Stupid. Spineless. And how you could allow this to happen—"

"Practical," I snapped back. "And he wouldn't have been hurt if he'd stayed out of it." I took off my jacket and placed it around Nick's shoulders. "You're not angry about Nick's injuries. You're mad I brought him here, instead of to you."

Lacroix's expression was completely blank, only his eyes watching me, and then he smiled, slowly, beatifically. "And what do you think of our good doctor?" I shrugged, glancing down at Nick. "Or perhaps I should ask, what are you going to do about her?" His voice was hungry, coaxing me for the answer he wanted.

"Nothing," I whispered, lifting my gaze to his.

"Nothing at all? Are you sure that's . . . wise?"

"I don't care if it isn't!" Nick moved restlessly, and I lowered my voice again. "You sound like you know a lot about her, Lacroix. Why didn't you mention Dr. Lambert before? Or better yet, why haven't you killed her yourself? After all, she does know too much . . . No one would question you."

Lacroix feigned boredom, but the glitter of anger in his eyes betrayed his true feelings. "We met once, although she doesn't remember it. I didn't think she was worth killing. Nicholas's pets never last long . . . He's careless that way. And I am not an Enforcer, after all. It's not my responsibility."

"Damn right it's not," I whispered. "I haven't made up my mind yet. Not completely."

"What's to decide? She's a threat. You're an

Enforcer. It's simple." That hypnotic, musical voice again, and the amused smile. Like the snake in Eden, but so much easier for me to resist. Hate can sometimes armor you from making quick choices. If I hadn't distrusted him so deeply, I might have done what he'd hoped for as soon as I'd known about Natalie.

"No, it isn't," I muttered in a low voice. "But that's what you wanted, wasn't it? That's the whole reason you landed on my rooftop a week ago. You were hoping I'd just react, that I'd kill her or bring her across . . . especially after I'd realized how much Tracy Vetter knew. You thought you had a no-lose situation. That I'd either have to deal with Dr. Lambert as you wanted, or face the Others."

My voice trailed off at the end of this speech, as the consequences of the choice I was making hit me. I stared down at Nick. I couldn't do it. I couldn't kill her, because that would mean fighting Nick, killing him . . . and I really would rather die. I stared at Lacroix, fighting chills and trying to ignore the various scrapes and twinges that were finally making themselves known.

"Perhaps." He laid his hand next to Nick's face, seeing what I saw: pain, but no sign of imminent death. "I suppose I must settle for your demise instead of hers. Nicholas will mourn, of course . . . but not too long, I think." Lacroix met my eyes, still smiling, but there was now a slight edge of satisfaction to his expression. "I'll just have to deal with Dr. Lambert in some other fashion."

I was about to reply when the sound of approaching footsteps alerted us to Natalie's return. He moved to the exit, smiled coolly and said, "Give my regards to the Others. I used to be quite chummy with some of them."

I'll bet he was, too. I'll bet half of Them owe him favors, or have other ties to him. He is one of the oldest of us; everyone must have run into him at one time or another . . .

This won't get any easier if you wait, I told myself. _Now or never._

I opened the door in the back of my mind, and they greeted me, wondering what I had to report. I gave it to them whole: everything that had happened since Saturday night. The murders, Tracy's involvement, Natalie Lambert's knowledge, the fight with Ava Malenkov, my encounters with Lacroix, all of it. Then I waited.

A half-instant of utter silence. Then total chaos, pounding at me, too disorganized to understand. Eventually, I could discern voices through the storm.

Fool!

I told you she was too young to become one of Us—

Why?

You must.

Natalie Lambert is a threat.

What?

SILENCE! A sound like a cello string snapping, then pain, and then quiet. *_Morgana. Why have you reversed your decision with regard to Tracy Vetter? And why have you refused to take action against Dr. Lambert?_* A male voice, like a slow cello dirge. I couldn't breathe—the force of that mind was too powerful to deny. He wasn't coercing me, but this was the opportunity I'd hoped for, my one shot at telling my reasons for what I did.

Tracy Vetter is like me. I trust her. I believe that she will not endanger us, even if she breaks with Vachon. I closed my eyes, seeing Kendra staking Nick again, and Tracy threatening me with the cross. *_She is actually more trustworthy that the Spaniard. It is because of her that he tried to track the killer. Maybe some day she'll come across of her own free will. Until then, the thrall bond is unnecessary. Vachon will never control her any more than he is forced to, and her judgement is better than his, and more reliable as a means of restraint._*

And Natalie Lambert?

Thin ice. Thin enough to see water moving beneath the surface, waiting to seize me and stop my heart with its cold embrace. *_I . . . I think that she has done our Community too many services to be forced into a decision. And she is already thoroughly compromised. Her career will be forfeit if her 'modifications' of various autopsies is ever made public. Given her ties to Nick, I think it's likely she'll become one of us at some point in the future. But I won't make that choice for her._*

Won't?

Chaos again. Fury and anger and disappointment, which was almost the worst. I tried to send more, but there was too much noise, and no one wanted to hear it. Finally, a lull, and in it I could hear the flute again, with a sense of mourning beneath her words.

Your decisions are not, in themselves, incorrect. I believe that if you examine the facts, my associates, you will realize that Morgana has not compromised the Community, or betrayed the Code. A rumble of discontent from one corner, yet an overall sense of acquiescence. *_What I find disturbing, Morgana, is your lack of consideration for your peers. Your blatant disregard for what our wishes might have been. Your failure to consult us, when it was obvious that we should have been consulted._*

Definitely.

Absolutely.

Damn headstrong brat.

What were you thinking of?

NICHOLAS! A chorus of voices, tinged with disgust, exasperation, frustration, anger . . . The wealth of emotion in that one name said it all.

Always a problem—

Never should have been allowed—

What about her? Too young—

No control—

Impossible—

PLEASE! They were quiet again, and I opened my eyes. Sunrise was only minutes away. **You can order me to kill all three of them. I won't do it. You can order my death, but I won't hurt them. Some ties go too deep. I owe Nick too much. If that's treason, make the most of it!** More discontent, more anger. **Unless you just like to dance to Lacroix's tune.** Rage, insult! Furious mutterings, epithets thrown in my direction. Then the cello spoke again.

We have never bowed to the wishes of one individual. And it is obvious that Lacroix was hoping for an immediate judgement. That is not the question under discussion. Natalie Lambert and Tracy Vetter have been judged trustworthy from their actions over the past week, and the information you have gathered. For now. A pause, then he went on, the sound strengthening as he gained support from the others. **However. Your actions may be (just barely) acceptable. Your attitude is not. I am afraid you can no longer be trusted. Action must be taken.**

Yes.

Punishment.

Pain.

Death.

Clemency?

Youth, immaturity—

There was some debate. And then the flute spoke again.

If I may make a suggestion? Assent. **Morgana Harte. Your recent actions, and your reluctance to report to the Order on recent events, make it impossible for us to trust you alone. You will not be allowed to work without a partner for the next five years, at least. You will not be allowed to use your abilities as an Enforcer, or sit in judgement, without the concurrence of this partner. You will not be allowed contact with Nicholas Knight, or Lucien Lacroix, for the rest of their lifetimes in Toronto. Since your divided loyalties and conflicts are connected to these two, you will never be allowed to mediate questions regarding their actions. And you will leave Toronto as soon as possible.**

Stoically, I accepted their judgement. It was the least they could have done. Although the thought of leaving Nick so soon after he'd been hurt tore at me. This wasn't what I'd had in mind last week, when I was unpacking. This wasn't what I'd hoped for. A home near someone I cared about, near my old friends . . . but they were right. My loyalties *were* in question. (No, they aren't, said some small part of me. They're wrong. They don't care about justice, or mercy. Just expediency)

Should you violate any of these conditions, you will be immediately stripped of your place in our Order, and declared rogue, subject to the judgement of whatever Enforcer next encounters you. How do you respond?

You're kidding me? *That* was uncalled for. Unbelievable. What had I done to deserve this? Nothing! To put me on probation . . . to put those kind of conditions on me—they knew what the loss of my place would mean. I'd become what I'd been. The monster. The murderer. They couldn't—

NO! Again, a majority answered. **We are in accord. Our judgement is final. How say you?**

I accept your judgement. What else could I do? Scream about the unfairness of it? Tell them to stuff it?

Then our hearing is concluded. Be out of Toronto within one week, or face the consequences. And they were gone. I was alone again on the rooftop. Like always.

The light was starting to creep across the sky. It's like racing a train sometimes, to try and see if you can move faster than the sun can find you. For a moment, I toyed with the idea of just remaining on the rooftop. It would solve everything. I'd be keeping the promise I made myself thirty years ago. I wouldn't have to deal with these questions any longer . . . and then I thought of how Lacroix would laugh, and I opened the skylight and ducked inside, closing the window guard as I came in.

I stared around my apartment. Dammit. Well, at least I wouldn't have to repack most of it. I'd hardly had time to get settled. Gloomily, I wondered what my publisher would say when I told her that I was moving again, for the second time in two weeks. I'd have to call Aristotle . . .

Why didn't it feel like I'd won? I was still alive. Natalie Lambert was still alive. Tracy Vetter was free. Nick didn't have any more reasons to be angry with me. Lacroix didn't get his own way. So why didn't it feel like a victory?

Aristotle . . . I punched in his number, said hello, and explained what I needed. Then, tentatively, I asked him a question. Pleaded a little. Flattered him a lot, and got the answer I wanted. Then I hung up and called Tracy Vetter's apartment, getting her answering machine. "You're in the clear. And like I said, you won't see me again." Who else did I have to—Oh, right, Natalie. I called Nick's place, and got the machine. Maybe they were there, but I doubted they would pick up the phone. "Nick? Tell Natalie I talked to the Others . . . You're both safe for now. But tell her to destroy the evidence she hid. It won't help, and it'll only annoy them if she keeps it around." I swallowed, then went on, "I'm leaving Toronto . . ."

He picked up the phone. "Why are you leaving?"

"I have to. They weren't real thrilled with me. They don't want me to see you for as long as you're still here in Toronto."

"Why?" Nick sounded mad. I smiled, glad that he didn't seem angry with me.

"They think you're a bad influence. And that the whole situation with Natalie and Tracy is too messy as it is. They're probably right." I looked around the room again, feeling too wound up and wired to sleep. Maybe if I started packing now, I'd be ready to leave in the next day or two. "I'm sorry, Nick. For everything—"

"You don't have anything to apologize for," Nick said fervently. "Tracy called. She seemed . . . different."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah." The warmth from his voice seemed to seep into all the cold places left by the Others. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you? Or why Vachon left a message, saying you were 'pretty cool'?"

"Nope. I refuse to answer on the grounds I might incriminate myself." I actually giggled, then softly said, "Hey. Maybe we'll run into each other next lifetime."

"I . . . hope not. But you know what I'm hoping for," Nick's voice was quiet, and I could hear Natalie asking him a question in the background. "Give me a call when you get where you're going?"

"Sure. Just like always . . . G'bye, Nick. Love you," I whispered.

"Good-bye, Morgana. And you know . . . you know that if you need me, I'll be there. Enforcers or no Enforcers. Take care of yourself." Then, very low, so low I almost wasn't sure I heard it, "I love you too, Morgan." Then he hung up.

Two more phone calls. Then I'd start packing.

* * *

Four friends went to a Halloween party.

Jo met a vampire, had glorious sex with him, and died of it. I walked into the bedroom two minutes later, in time to see Elliot slitting her throat, started screaming, and then tried to kill him with a lamp. I pounded on him with my fists, kicked, bit, punched . . . and then he sank his fangs into my neck, and you know the rest.

Anna got scared by something—I still don't know what—tried to leave the party, and ran right into the arms of another vampire, who brought her across about three hours before I died. The Enforcers killed her three days later, when she was trying to attack a cop in the bar where I met and nearly killed Vachon. I'm not real clear on the details, I barely made it out of there with my skin intact. Somehow, I stumbled away and came across Nick, who spoke softly, and gave me his blood, took me home and put me to bed. Just like picking up a stray kitten. One with rabies.

And Stephanie?

Steph left the party early, sicker than a dog from the drugs she'd taken, and got lucky enough to run into a cop who busted her and took her to the hospital. She got her stomach pumped, her temperature taken, and then her parents were called. She probably found out about the rest of us around three days later, when they found Jo. Anna and I were assumed to have died in the bar fire where her body was found. The police chalked it up to the Texas Ripper copycat, and decided we were his last victims. Stephanie dropped out of school. Got married. Got divorced. Went back to school. Got married again.

Sometimes, when I'm very, very stressed, I call her. Just to hear her voice. To remind myself of what almost was. She has three children (her oldest son is a little younger than Tracy) and lives in Dallas.

"Hello?" I don't say anything, just listen to her voice. She's fine, I can tell. I can always tell.

"Is anyone there?" It's awfully early to be getting prank calls in Dallas. Especially when you have to get up and teach third grade.

"C'mon, I can hear you breathing. What do you want?" I could have been her. She could have been me. But I'm not really sorry it worked out like this. Right, Morgan?

"I'm sorry," I say in a fake British accent. "Is this the Ruskin residence?"

"Nope. It's the Erlings'. Look, I know what Information keeps telling you people, but Diana Ruskin doesn't live here anymore." Steph is annoyed. I always ask for the same person, so she'll never guess. My parents are dead, and I can't call my brother . . . He's got his own problems. And I wouldn't be able to stop myself from telling him who it was, anyway. So I call Steph. Just to know that something worked out for someone.

"My apologies. I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, well, no problem. G'bye," Steph mutters as she hangs up.

"Bye, Steph." Only the dial tone hears me. I stare at the phone for a very long time. Long enough for the disconnect signal to beep at me. Long enough to stop crying.

Then I call the number Aristotle gave me.

Epilogue

Another time, another place

". . . and that's when I called you," Morgana finished, taking a sip of her drink. I withheld comment, uncertain of what to say. Perhaps because there was nothing to be said. There were times in the past, at the Raven, when it was clear who wished for advice, and who merely needed a receptive ear. And there was no counsel I could give her, in any event. From my windowseat, we watched the snow fall outside, icy thick and soft, blanketing Montreal in stillness.

The blood in our glasses was sweet and warm, well-laced with brandy, and it seemed to have calmed Morgana to the extent she was capable of being so. It had not been easy for her to tell me what had happened in Toronto; sometimes she slipped out of English into Spanish or Italian, and the telephone conversation between herself and Nicolas was entirely in French—which she does not speak well, a subtle sign of how little she wished to remember their discussion. It had not been any easier for me to hear the tale.

She put down her snifter carefully, still watching the snow fall. "Do you hate me?"

I frowned, and took another sip of my drink. "Why should I hate you?"

"That's not an answer, Janette." Her voice was flat and dull, her fingers absently toying with the stem of her glass. "I know how you feel about Enforcers—" I could not stifle the twitch that passed through me, but I do not think she noticed it. "—and you can't exactly be *thrilled* that I've become one." She rolled her eyes. "God knows Nick wasn't."

"Mmmm. But Nicolas has much more to fear from them than I do." No reason to mention my own doubts, or growing suspicions. I am . . . fond, of Morgana. But she is very young, and has been through much. And she will be leaving at the end of this week. "It is not something I would have chosen for you." She bent her head to study her drink, her fingers tracing the edges of the bowl. I grasped the snifter, taking it away from her and forcing her to face me. "But I believe you when you say you had little choice." Her face was tense with fear, holding herself ready for hurt. I marvelled again that They asked her to become one of Them—she is unsuited to that life, except for her madness and power. "No, Morgana, I do not hate you," I said impatiently, quirking my eyebrows, forcing a smile to her face. "Either for what you have become or what you have done. But I think you know—" I studied her carefully "—that it was a mistake."

She closed her eyes, swallowing convulsively, and held out her hand for the glass. I gave it back and she gulped half the contents, gasping a little at the fire of the brandy. Opening her eyes, I saw the pain and loneliness that have always been there, ever since I met her in Venice. She lost too much in the Crossing, I think. I had nothing to lose, and much to gain, and even I . . . have my regrets. Morgana's life was sweet, easy, and soft before Elliot made his final miscalculation. It is a wonder that she is still alive now, instead of a pile of ashes in some Texas desert.

"Mistake," Morgana echoed me. "All of this has been a mistake. My survival. Being an Enforcer. But . . . I don't want to die. I think that would be another mistake." She looked out the window again, and I could see no trace of Nicolas's despair, or her own madness. She was only Morgan, who delighted in finding new cafes and shops in Italy, and who still sends me Halloween presents when she knows my address. "I've never had to act against my friends before," she whispered.

"It will be the last time you will have to," I pointed out. "The last time you will be *allowed* to, *ma petite*. Remind yourself of that. Things will become simple again soon enough."

She snorted. "Only if they don't saddle me with some retro-fascist of a partner. Five years, Janette. They're busting me back down to buck private, when I used to be a first lieutenant, and they're not letting me off the leading reins until they're satisfied I won't 'screw up' again." She leaned her forehead against the window, staring down onto the park below. "I got used to having my own way. I'm not sure how well this is gonna work out . . ."

"It will be fine," I said bracingly, pouring more brandy-and-blood into her snifter. "There is no other alternative."

"True."

We sat and drank in silence a while, then she spoke again. "Lacroix hasn't changed a bit."

"He never does."

"No," she laughed softly. Then, abruptly, "Why do you think he hates me so much?"

I shrugged, returning my gaze to the scene outside the window. "Who can say, for certain?" Morgana shifted restlessly beside me, and I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye. "You could ask him."

"I did." Her lower lip was stuck out in a pout, dark lashes framing dissatisfied eyes. "He said I was a threat to Nick. That I'll get him killed someday. He hasn't budged on that since Texas."

"That is probably enough." She still didn't look happy. Sighing, I put down my drink and swung my legs down from the cushions. "*Cherie*, you are much like Nicolas, and all the things that Lacroix most dislikes about him. Idealistic. Impractical." I stood, holding out my hand to her, and she let me pull her to her feet. "And you do not trust Lacroix, or respect him. Or fear him. He does not forgive that easily." I shook my head, putting my palm against her cheek. "Finally, Nicolas cares about you. Lacroix will brook no rivals, and he is . . . insulted, I think, that someone whom Nicolas has known for such a short time should be closer to his son than he, who has known him 800 years, and brought him across."

Her eyes widened suddenly, and a thoughtful look flashed across her face. "That explains . . . a lot," she said, raising her hand to rest against mine, and tilting her head into the caress. She gave my hand a quick squeeze, then moved away. Morgana probably understood what I did not say: that Natalie Lambert will always be in danger for that very reason. She may even come across some day or find that cure for my former *chevalier*. But she will never be safe from Lacroix.

Any more than Morgana will ever be safe at all. I watched her, and listened to her talk about her incipient move to Prague, and thought again what I thought when Nick had first arrived with her in tow at my *palazzio* in Venice: this one will not last the century.

Too much power, too little balance. She will not die from carelessness or stupidity, I think. It is much more likely that her passions will be her death, that she will die for love or in killing some unstable rogue or murdered by someone who hates or loves her. I should not let it hurt me. If I am right, I will have no claim on her soon—she will no longer be my little sister, my foster daughter. I should not care about her at all. *One should not let the young ones matter so much, Janette,* I scolded myself. *They should simply be amusing, or infuriating.*

But despite my best intentions, my heart continues to thaw, and the thought of her gone from the world does not make me happy. The thought of never seeing her again, if I am right about what I am becoming . . . hurts. Not as much as the thought of Nicolas, but then, there is no other pain next to that one. I shall miss her with all my heart. I shall mourn him to the depths of my soul.

Morgana turned, and caught some glimpse of my thoughts in my expression. "Janette? What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I crossed to her side, and took the CD she held out of her hand. "Not that one, it is too sad . . . Something sweet, I think. Yes . . ."

We listened to Edith Piaf until the sun began to rise, then closed the shutters and went to our beds as the snow continued to fall.

end

"The world breaks all of us . . . but if we are lucky, some of us become stronger at the broken places." —Madeline L'Engle

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The previous story was written over the course of five months (October 1995-March 1996) on the Forever Knight Fiction List (FKFIC-L), during the third (and hopefully not last) season of FK. I started writing it sometime after "Black Buddha" and finished it prior to the airing of "Fallen Idol", so if it varies in tone or attitude, keep in mind that much of the subject matter was influenced by what I was watching at the time. It takes place in the FK universe after "My Boyfriend is a Vampire" and before "Night in Question". The version that appears here is slightly altered from the original, although no major plot points have been changed. If there seem to be dangling threads, blame it on the cliffhanger format I was using; over 28 installments, it's possible that I left an inconsistency or two waving in the breeze.

I want to thank my friends on the Lists, many of whom sent comments that clarified my thoughts and gave me ideas (you know who you are) or inspired me with dire threats to keep writing on pain of a messy death (thanks, Dianne). And especially Marg, and Anime House—I never would have gotten around to publishing this myself, and I'm grateful that she thought it was something that should be included in this fanzine.

Morgana Harte is my own creation, copyright © 1995. Or at least, that's what I tell myself . . . CLK

Surprises

by

Debra Ann Fiorini

"Nick, I think we're coming close!" Nat held up a test tube and grinned like the Cheshire Cat. She quickly continued speaking before Nick could flashback to some weird stuff that happened last year after he drank bad blood. "I think a cure is on the way. By Christmas time, you and I will be sitting together at morning Mass." She sounded as ecstatic as she looked.

"So when can we try . . . ?"

"A cure for what?" Tracy had slipped silently into the morgue and stopped Nick in mid-sentence. Both he and Nat turned to face her with the same deer-in-the-headlights look. In other words, Nat looked surprised, Nick looked normal.

"Umm . . ." Nat was afraid her next few words wouldn't be very convincing. "I've been working on something to help Nick's allergy to . . . um . . . sunlight. Just my little bit for science."

"Oh, yeah." Tracy shook her straight blonde hair. Nick and Nat grimaced in disgust as it fell perfectly back into place. She smiled. "Allergy . . . sure . . . allergy."

Nat felt a little strange about Tracy's reaction to the situation. Nick, of course, didn't notice anything wrong.

❑❑❑❑❑

"I might have to kill her," Nick said to himself. "I might just have to drag her into an alley and kill her." It was beginning to be the only thing he thought of when he looked at Tracy. All that was stopping him was Nat's request not to do it until she could help.

Nick's only consolation was the thought that Tracy was mortal, and one of these days she would be little more than a bad memory. At that moment, Nick smiled for the first time in twenty-seven years.

Tonight had been especially tense. At the close of the shift, Tracy was describing the night's arrests to whomever would listen.

"So the perp just turns and runs." Tracy was employing arm gestures galore to embellish. "I take off running, and Nick is behind me. All of a sudden, I turn the corner after the guy, and there's Nick putting cuffs on the suspect! It was so amazing!"

Tracy turned slightly so she was looking him straight in the eyes as she concluded, "He was so fast, it was as if he could fly."

As if that wasn't the final straw for Nick, her next comment did it. "So, Nick, if you don't mind me asking. . . . Do you purposely try to get your hair to look like that or is it just always really windy between your place and here?"

Yes, he decided, she was soon going to be his first hot meal in several years.

❑❑❑❑❑

While some people counted down the hours until their work shift was over, and others without lives, like Natalie and LaCroix, counted the hours until their shifts as, respectively, coroner and on-air philosopher started, Nick counted down the hours until he could drop his partner off at home.

Next, he decided a visit to LaCroix was due. They had gotten closer since the amnesia and possession incidents, and Nick wanted to spend some time with his father before Nat's cures finally worked. He was nothing if not optimistic that he would be cured. . . or maybe naive is a better word for Nick. LaCroix, on the other hand, could think of many words to describe

Nick, but none of them are printable here.

Nick entered the back door of the Raven and found LaCroix sadly closing up the radio station for the night. Via radio was the only way he could get people to listen to him anymore. He really did little else, except for the knitting, but no one was supposed to know about that.

Without turning around, LaCroix could sense his favorite son approaching. "What's wrong?" LaCroix had the type of voice which, regardless of tone, demanded an answer.

"I'm confused." Nick sat down on the edge of the radio console and sighed.

"I know that." LaCroix looked up. "You're not listening. I didn't ask what's usual, I asked what's wrong."

"Huh?" asked Nick. "You say something? Oh yeah, the reason I'm here. I want to know why you've been following me around."

"Nicolas, I can assure you, I have not been following you. For what reason would I do that?"

"Get off it, LaCroix. I don't know why you do it, but every now and then while I'm working I can feel you in the distance. Something subtle."

"You sense me?" LaCroix looked honestly mystified.

"Not you, exactly, but a vampire. A very old one. Close by. Since you're the only very ancient vampire I know, it has to be you." Nick was met with silence. "It is you, isn't it?"

"No." LaCroix shook his head slowly, and Nick could tell he was being truthful.

"Then what else can it be? Another ancient vampire in Toronto? That's not possible."

"I would have sensed it, surely." LaCroix was talking more to himself than to Nick. "Unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Very old vampires, those near my age, can disguise or mask themselves sometimes. It's difficult but possible. I did it myself the year you thought you'd killed me. . . ."

Nick winced.

"I was watching you then, but not now," LaCroix continued. "Scout's honor."

"You were never a boy scout," Nick corrected.

"No, but I once had one for lunch," LaCroix called after Nick's departing form.

❑❑❑❑❑

The knock on the door threw off LaCroix's counting. Now he would have to redo the hem on the slippers he was making. He stuck his knitting into the kitty-shaped basket and kicked it under his couch. "Enter."

LaCroix rose to greet his guest. Upon seeing who it was, his blue eyes widened like saucers, and he found himself at a loss for words. "You!"

"I thought it was time we talked."

"I never would have guessed. We must have never been close enough for me to sense you."

"I've been around. I just thought it easier to hide myself from you until now."

LaCroix poured a glass of house special for his guest. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Your son?"

"Nicolas. Why?"

"His search for a cure has gotten out of hand. I fear he and Dr. Lambert are coming a little too close. Since you haven't been watching him all too well, I have."

"He feels you. Thinks it's me."

"I know. Sometimes when I let my mind wander, I lose my grip and Nick senses something."

"From what Nicolas tells me, your mind wanders a lot. He must be sensing you right and left."

"Don't annoy me, Lucien. I could easily destroy both you and Nick!"

"I meant no harm."

"Well, I do. Stop Nick's silly quest once and for all . . . or I will."

❑❑❑❑❑

Tracy hung up the phone in a huff and stalked into the bathroom. She never could understand why her father had insisted on marrying that woman. She wasn't her real mother, but for longer than Tracy wanted to remember, she had been forced to obey her and call her "Mom". How distressing. Maybe her father would do away with this woman soon, and things would be easier. No more hearing she didn't get out enough or she didn't have the right kinds of friends.

Tracy adjusted her revealing, powder-blue lace blouse and put in her new gold-and-gemstone earrings. To think the woman in the jewelry store had suggested a pair of silver cross earrings. Those would not go over well with the company she kept.

She was starting to feel a little nervous. Even after all these years, Tracy smiled at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. No matter how old she was, she still felt queasy in the last few minutes before her date arrived. It was actually fun to date a younger man, although sometimes she didn't know quite what to say. Trying to sound hip often just made her sound stupid.

Of course, there would be much more for them to talk about when she told him the truth. *Maybe tonight*, she thought as she paced back and forth in her living room. *Maybe tonight.*

Tracy's date called to say he would be running a bit late, and asked her to meet him. She agreed and left in time to make another stop first. Something was bothering her and she wanted to deal with it before it proved too late.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nat jumped at the sound of Tracy's voice coming from behind her.

"So, how's the big cure coming?"

"Oh, Tracy, I didn't expect you. Do you need to pick something up?"

"No, just thought I'd drop in for a friendly girl chat."

"Where's Nick?"

"I don't know. I didn't invite him along. He's not a girl."

"I might not be a detective, Trace, but I did notice that about him."

"Yes, well, he is the planned topic of conversation, though."

"Really?"

"Didn't you hear me when I came in? I asked how the big cure was coming along."

"Whatever do you mean?" Natalie was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable, and moved herself around to the other side of the examining table.

"You know what I mean. The cure you are working on for Nick's . . . condition. Coming close to a final result?"

"Oh, you mean his allergy. No, nothing too promising right now."

"Why don't you give up?"

"Give up curing Nick? I don't follow." Nat shook her head in confusion. She never expected to have this conversation with Tracy, of all people.

"Give up working on a cure, yes. And give up calling it an 'allergy'. We both know the truth."

"Truth? What truth?"

"The fact that you are dating a bloodsucking creature of the night."

"How dare you accuse me of dating a lawyer! I don't even know any lawyers!"

"I meant Nick!"

"Oh, my God! Nick's a lawyer. No wonder he's always too busy to spend time with me. I—"

"I think you're overworked, Nat. I was referring to the fact that Nick is a vampire."

"Oh. I feel better now. Wait . . . You know! Why that rat Vachon! He told you, didn't he? After I made him swear not to."

"You know Vachon?"

"Well, when Nick's busy, you don't think I just sit home, do you? I'm not that pathetic!"

"You're a coroner in love with a dead man."

"Undead."

"Still and all."

"Okay, I'm pathetic, just not that pathetic." Nat thought for a minute, then added, "You know Nick's a vampire and you want me to give up on his cure. Why?"

"The both of you are a threat to the Community. Either stop what you are doing or meet dire consequences."

"Wow, Tracy, good use of a big word."

"Thank you. Anyway, it's halt or die. LaCroix should have handled this years ago."

"How do you know all this?"

"I know many things." Tracy turned and showed her true self. In a second, Natalie screamed.

"What's the matter?!" Tracy jumped from Nat's unexpected reaction.

"Oh, sorry." Nat blushed. "When I turned to look at you, I noticed my own reflection in the mirror over there. I didn't realize I was having such a bad hair day . . . er . . . night."

"No problem."

Calmer now, as she combed her hair, Nat asked, "So how long have you been a vampire, Tracy?"

With her eyes still glowing, Tracy answered, "Longer than you would believe. I've been with the Enforcers since 1642."

"Enforcers." Nat shuddered. "Do tell."

"First, promise to give up curing Nick."

"Oh, that. There's really no cure. I figured out three years ago it was a lost cause."

"But Nick thinks . . ."

"Not on a regular basis," Nat chimed in.

Tracy laughed. "So you've been stringing him along?"

"It keeps him close to me. Wouldn't you do the same?"

"Yeah," Tracy said. "I'm pleased there's no cure. Now if I can get Nick to give up his quest. . . ."

"You win a prize?"

"No—I save you both from execution."

❑❑❑❑❑

Vachon paced and blinked. "I've always tried to be as truthful with you as possible, and you hide this from me!"

"Don't you realize we can now be together? I was an Enforcer, I needed to be secretive. Now that I've decided to stay in Toronto, I can finally reveal my true self."

"What about your family?"

"Daddy's really my master."

"Your mom?"

"Mortal and expendable."

Vachon paced and blinked some more before Tracy spoke again.

"Can't you accept this?"

"I have no problem with you being a vampire, Tracy. It's just you're older than LaCroix and that gives me second thoughts."

"Why?"

"Well, you're 2300 and I'm 481."

"So?"

"I don't normally like to date older women. I'll need some time to think this through."

☐☐☐☐☐

Under the extraordinary circumstances of this night, Nat took her chances and went to the Raven to locate Nick. The possibility he might be terminated by the Enforcers caused her to risk her life to warn him. She found him at the bar pawing a scantily clad young woman.

"Nick!"

Shocked, Nick slipped off his barstool, entangling his hand in the young woman's garter belt.

"I thought you came here to talk to LaCroix." Nat freed Nick's hand from the young slut . . . er . . . woman and dragged him away.

"You mean that wasn't LaCroix?" Nick feigned surprise and ignorance . . . more so than usual.

"I should say not!"

"Oops, guess I left my glasses at home."

"Uh huh."

"So, what's wrong? Why did you come here?"

"I have to tell you something about Tracy. Brace yourself. She's just like you."

"Hey! There is no reason to insult me!"

"No, I didn't say you're like her. I said she's like you! A . . . you know . . ."

"A cop? Yeah, I know."

Nick was temporarily stunned by the hit to his head.

"I think what the good doctor is trying to make you understand, but with little luck, is that your partner is the ancient vampire you've been sensing." LaCroix had sauntered over and was congratulating Natalie on her perfect aim.

"No way."

"Yes, Nick. I think we should talk." Tracy seated herself at the table. Nat and LaCroix took it as their cue to leave.

☐☐☐☐☐

Two weeks later

LaCroix poured two drinks and handed one to Tracy. "I like my son much better now that he is back to his old self. When he and Nat came to me with the request of bringing her across, I couldn't refuse. I know two weeks of training isn't much, but the good doctor catches on quickly, and she and my son are lovely together. She is helping him embrace his true nature. Whatever did you say to make him give up his silly quest for a cure?"

"Well—" Tracy took a sip from her glass— "I know he was feeling guilty about the lives he took. I just helped him to think about the lives he saved. Many people who would have been dead are now alive because of him. Murderers caught, victims rescued, and so on. If his life had ended in 1228, there are many wrongs which wouldn't have been righted without him. He never thought of it that way before."

"Ah, Nick without so much guilt. How can I ever repay you?"

Before Tracy could answer, Vachon entered the Raven and found her. "Tracy, I finally decided I miss you, and I want you back."

"Sorry, too late."

"What?"

"I decided you really were way too young for me. So, I've moved on to someone closer to my age."

"Who?"

"LaCroix."

"But, you said you loved me. You said you loved running your fingers through my long hair."

"Until I lost my favorite ring in there. Did you find it yet?"

"No, sorry. Not yet. Anyway, you can't do that to him."

"Actually—" Tracy grinned— "I dress up as Little Bo Peep and LaCroix dresses . . . Hey, never mind! The point is, we're happy together."

Vachon had more to say, but when he saw LaCroix working his way back over to them, he thought better of it and took off to find Urs.

LaCroix slipped his arm around Tracy's shoulder. "How did he take it?"

"As good as can be expected." Tracy sighed.

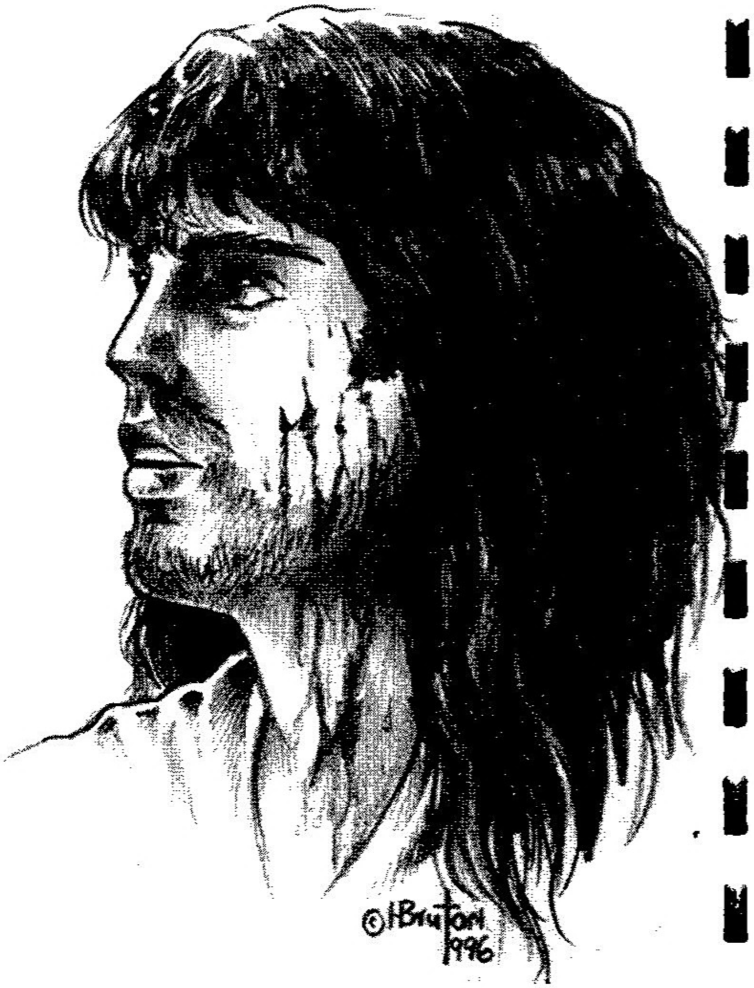
"So, you never did tell me how I can repay you for bringing Nicolas back to me."

Tracy giggled and pulled a Little Bo Peep costume out from under the bar. "Guess."

end

Faraway Inside 1: Septicemia

by Bonnie Pardoe



[NOTE: This story is an alternate ending to "Ashes to Ashes". The dialogue is verbatim from the episode through to Vachon saying "I'm dying."]

"Vachon?" Tracy made her way down the concrete stairs into the basement of the church. She spotted Vachon huddled in an old chair in the corner.

"Vachon, what happened?" When he did not respond, she touched his shoulder. "Vachon?"

He turned suddenly to face her, his eyes that feral yellow for less than an instant. "What are you doing here? You have to leave—now." His voice was small but his meaning was firm.

"Who did this to you? Vachon, talk to me!" The fear, worry, and concern were plain on Tracy's face and in her voice. He looked like that body found at the Raven—like he had been mauled by a wild animal. "You said you knew who the murderer is."

Suddenly he was upon her, like a banshee, throwing her hard down onto the couch. His face was contorted with rage—fangs bared and eyes the predatory yellow of a jungle cat.

His voice was low—"Her thoughts becoming my thoughts"—almost inhuman.

Then suddenly, it was gone. His features, placid again, held only confusion; he looked like a lost, little boy.

"It's all right." She hugged him close, the attack completely forgotten. "Shhh. It's okay. Your wounds will heal." She stroked his hair and rubbed his back. "Shhh."

"I'm not healing. I'm dying." There was no hope in his voice, and he sunk into Tracy's embrace as though it would be their last.

"Of course you'll heal. It's what vampires do best." She tried to sound hopeful, but she was just too terrified by what was happening to pull it off.

I fall for a guy who is supposed to live forever, she thought to herself, *and he gets deathly ill twice in one year? What kind of bad luck is that?*

"I can feel it, Trace. The pain is getting worse and the visions—Arrggghhhh." He pushed away from her, clutching his stomach and falling in a heap on the floor.

"Vachon!" She was instantly at his side, even though she had no idea what she could do to help him.

Again, he was upon her in less than a heartbeat. This time, they both flew, tumbling as Tracy struggled, into the wall. Vachon took most of the impact, but Tracy knew she would be bruised in the morning, anyway.

"Go, Tracy. Before I really hurt you." He was lucid again, thank God.

"No. I won't leave you."

"Tracy. Please. I can't control it. I will kill you if you stay."

"I don't care. I can't leave you like this."

He reached over and stroked her pale blonde hair. She had called him evil earlier that evening, and she had been more right than she knew. Vachon could hear her heart racing and could smell the fear in her. He knew she was more frightened than she had ever been in her life—yet she stayed.

"Why, Tracy?"

"Why, what?"

"Why won't you go, save your own life?"

"How can I leave you? You're hurt, you're sick. There has to be something I can do." She hugged him to her again.

"There isn't anything you can do." They lay there at the base of the wall just as they had fallen, limbs entangled. His head lay upon her shoulder and his arms were limp about her waist. "There isn't anything anyone can do."

She stroked his hair, and hugged him closer. "God! I wish I could just take you to the hospital!"

Memories of the night Screed had been so ill flooded Vachon's mind: *I can't take this one to the hospital, Knight. What am I going to tell them? He's allergic to penicillin, garlic, sunlight, crosses, and food. He's about four hundred and fifty, and he can fly?* A small smile crept across his face as he pictured Tracy trying to explain what he was to Admissions at the Emergency Room.

"There might be . . . someone."

"Who? Tell me." There was more desperation in Tracy's voice than she had intended.

"Doctor . . . um, Lambert."

"Natalie? But she's a coroner."

"Who better to treat . . . the undead? I never . . . told you. She's the one who . . . found the cure for that . . . fever Screed died of." His breath was getting raspy again, and he was beginning to shake.

"Come on, then. Let's get you over there right now, before this gets any worse." *Before you try to kill me again,* Tracy thought to herself. She helped him up. He was so weak, he could barely stand. She put his arm around her shoulder, and was able to support most of his weight by putting her arms around his waist. They slowly made their way up the stairs and out to her car.

She helped Vachon into the back seat, on the passenger side, so that she could keep an eye on him. She buckled the seat-belt around him, just in case.

"Trace. Do you have any rope? Anything to tie me down with once we get there—just in case?"

"Um . . .?" Her mind raced and she could barely catch the thoughts. "Ah, yeah, I've got something in the trunk."

"Get it."

Tracy was starting to shake, herself. There was a reason she had become a cop and not an EMT. She pulled the tie-downs out of the trunk on her way around the car. She got behind the wheel, started the car, threw on the police lights and siren, then gunned the engine. Straight down College, left on Bay, right on Grenville. Just a couple of miles. "Hang on back there."

"Ugh!" Vachon clutched at his stomach again. "Hurry . . . Trace."

"I am. We're almost there. Just hang on." She reached her hand back to him for comfort.

He grabbed her hand and sunk his fangs deep, right through the sleeve of her sweater, into the muscle of her forearm. She tried to yank her hand away, causing his fangs to gouge the skin on her arm. She struggled to keep the car on the road with her one free hand.

"Vachon!" He suddenly let go and sank back into the seat, his face placid again, his breath coming fast and in gasps.

Tracy, with blood oozing down her arm, managed to regain control of her car.

"Damn," she swore under her breath. They had missed Bay. *Okay,* she made a mental note, *left on Yonge, then.*

She hung a sloppy, quick left onto Yonge Street just as the traffic signal turned red. Just before she made a left onto Grenville, she cut the flashing police lights and siren. Suddenly, she slammed on the brakes of her car, throwing both herself and Vachon forward against their seat-belts.

"What's wrong?"

"Nick's car. He must be in visiting Nat. What are we going to do?"

Damn that Knight! "There's not much we can do." Vachon could just imagine the anger on Knight's face as he and Trace waltzed into the morgue. *Well, Tracy was bound to find out about Knight sooner or later. . . .*

"You're right. We'll have to wait until he leaves."

"Um . . . I don't know how much longer I can hang on here, Trace!" He grabbed his stomach again and clenched his teeth.

Just then, Tracy noticed Nick leaving the Coroner's building—she doused her headlights. He got into the Caddy and drove off down Grenville. As soon as he turned onto Bay Street, Tracy pulled her car into his vacated parking place at the curb. She killed the engine, jammed on the parking brake, grabbed the tie-downs, then raced around the car to help Vachon.

They managed, somehow, to make it into Natalie's office without anyone stopping them.

"Nat, we need your help."

"Tracy? What's the matter?"

"He's hurt."

Natalie rushed over and helped Tracy with her charge.

"Sit here." She settled Vachon into a chair and immediately began examining his wounds. They were just like Urs's, except not as deep and not as plentiful. "How did this happen?"

"I was attacked . . . by another," he dropped his voice to barely a whisper, "vampire."

Tracy was watching Nat's face closely, but she did not even flinch when he said the word. She *did* know.

"Tracy, help me move this body." Nat indicated the sheet-covered body on the slab. Natalie took the awkward legs; Tracy put her hands under the body's shoulders. "On three. One, two, three. Ummmph."

Natalie tossed Tracy a towel and pointed at the bloody stainless steel table as she wheeled the body into the cold storage locker.

Vachon watched as Nat carted the body away. The sheet was no longer completely covering the head, and Vachon saw blonde curls. He suddenly knew what that aching emptiness welling up inside him was: Urs was dead. He was too weak to fly to her; to rip the sheet away, sink his teeth into her neck again and bring her back. She was so young, so innocent still; she was just beginning to realize the wonders this new life really held for her.

"Vachon?" Tracy put her hand on his shoulder, her voice so tender it was almost as if she knew what he was thinking. "Come on over here." Tracy led him over to the table and helped him up. She took his leather jacket from him.

"Lie down, please." *Now there's a phrase you don't usually hear a coroner say.* Nat examined the claw marks on Vachon's face and neck. They were still fresh, as if they had only just been inflicted. "How long ago did you get these?"

"I . . . I don't know." He looked at Tracy, hoping for assistance. She took his hand in both of hers and looked deep into his sad, fathomless eyes. "It was right after I left you tonight."

Tracy suddenly realized that Vachon was speaking to her. "Oh. Ummm, that had to have been around, ah, 22:30."

Natalie glanced over at the clock. "Four hours ago? The blood hasn't clotted and the wounds haven't even begun to heal." Nat's mind raced. She had not learned anything from examining Urs yet. She had no idea what was causing this reaction, let alone how to treat it.

Suddenly, Vachon convulsed. "AAARRRGGGHHH."

He doubled over in pain, then, in the next instant, flew off the table. His eyes were wild again.

"No! Make it stop." He clutched at his head, as if trying to contain the visions. He whirled and spun as each new vision flashed through his mind. He made for the door, but Nat blocked his way. He grabbed her roughly by the shoulders and bared his fangs at her—there was no recognition in his eyes.

"Vachon!" Tracy grabbed him from behind, spun him to the floor, and pinned him there. She immediately felt all of his muscles go slack.

"Thanks." Nat gulped for air. "That was a bit too close for my comfort."

Natalie wasn't sure he was still conscious. "Vachon?"

She leaned down next to the now-listless vampire. His eyes were brown again, but the pupils were still constricted, as if his mind was still troubled.

"Come on, Tracy. Help me get him back up on the table." Natalie looked around, trying to find something to strap him down with.

Tracy clued in immediately.

"Here." She held up the tie-downs she had brought up from her car. "These ought to hold him."

Nat nodded. They did not look very strong—electric-blue, nylon webbing—but they were better than nothing.

"These will hold him. I've towed a car with them before!" Tracy attached the steel "S" hook under the lip of the table, brought the strap over Vachon's arms and chest, held the other "S" hook under the lip on the opposite side of the table, then pulled the strap as taut as she could. She re-adjusted her grip, then pulled again. Tracy placed another strap across his hips, and the final one across his legs, just above his knees.

While Tracy strapped Vachon down, Nat tried to talk to him again. "Can you tell me what just happened?"

"I keep having . . . these visions. She's . . . she's in my blood. I'm getting . . . weaker and . . . the images are getting . . . stronger. I can't . . . control . . . what she's doing to me." He started to thrash a bit, and gold crept back into his eyes.

Natalie remembered what Nick had told her once, that one's whole life was contained in each drop of blood. She extrapolated from Vachon's description that the exchange must go both ways. But Nick had also said that the images only remained for a few hours. Vachon had been attacked over four hours ago—how could the images be getting stronger?

She's in his blood. In his blood. Blood poisoning. Vampire septicemia!

"Just try to lie still, Vachon. Tracy, I'm going to need your help." Tracy nodded. "In that fridge over there . . . bring me every bag of blood. We're going to give your friend here a transfusion." Natalie hoped to God this would work.

Natalie dug through the supplies she kept for the Precinct's bi-monthly blood drive, and pulled out what she needed.

Tracy brought the bags of blood back to the slab on a small, rolling table. There were only five bags—more than enough for a human, but for a vampire . . . ? Nat had no idea.

I knew I should have ordered more bags from the Blood Bank yesterday, instead of just donating one of my own!

"Okay, Vachon. I'm going to insert this needle into the vein here in your arm. We're going to give this a try, okay?" Natalie's voice echoed in Vachon's ears and he managed to nod back at her.

The morgue was not really set up for this sort of thing, so Tracy hung the first bag of blood off the hook on the hanging scale normally used to weigh organs.

"Let's get started." Out of habit, Nat first swabbed Vachon's arm with iodine, then drew the sheath off the needle. As the needle pierced his skin, Vachon quickly sucked in air through his teeth.

Natalie was flying blind. She had to purge his system of the infected blood without killing him, but she had no idea how much blood loss a vampire could safely endure. Humans passed out after the loss of about a liter, about one-fifth of the body's blood contents. She watched for a moment as Vachon's blood dribbled into the collection bag.

"Tracy?" She indicated for Tracy to trade places with her. "Here. Hold his hand. Vachon? I want you to squeeze Tracy's hand once every couple of seconds, okay?"

Natalie's voice was so calm, but Vachon could hear her heart pounding.

Nat moved to the other side of the table, swabbed his other arm and inserted another needle.

"Ahh!" This time it was Tracy who let out the gasp of pain.

"Sorry." A small apologetic smile played upon Vachon's lips; he hadn't meant to squeeze her hand quite so hard.

"It's okay." She stroked his cheek with the back of her free hand, and smiled down at him. *Please, God. Don't let him die.*

Natalie hooked up the bag of blood, but kept the line clamped off—she was going to wait until the last possible moment before beginning the transfusion. "Tracy? How full is the collection bag getting?"

"About half."

"Whew. Already? Okay. Keep an eye on it. At three-quarters full I'll have to change it." Nat got another couple of collection bags out of the cabinet in anticipation. She hoped this worked; she had no idea how to treat a vampire who went into shock. Heck, she did not even know if she would recognize the symptoms of a vampire in shock.

"Natalie? I think the bag's full."

"Okay. Trace, clamp off that line. Good." Nat removed the connector from the full bag and inserted it into an empty one, then unclamped the line. She was going to have plenty of vampire blood to experiment on after this! She placed the full blood bag into an orange bio-hazard bag on the counter. *Can't risk anyone using this stuff by mistake.*

Between bag changes, Nat was able to tend the bite marks on Tracy's arm. "You're probably going to have a nasty scar from this, but there's not much I can do." Natalie gently patted Tracy's bandaged arm. "At least you don't have to worry about Rabies!"

* * *

Vachon's blood was flowing like water into the collection bag. Normally it took about seven to fifteen minutes to donate a quarter-liter, but Vachon was averaging four minutes per bag. Incredible for a guy whose heart beat only four times an hour!

"Vachon? Vachon! Nat! He's passed out!" There was definite panic in Tracy's voice.

"Finally," Natalie breathed. The seventh bag was just a little over half full—over a liter and a half!

"It's okay, Trace. We'll be able to start the transfusion now." They stared at each other, both hoping what Nat was doing was going to work.

"Clamp off that last bag, Trace," Natalie directed as she started the donated blood flowing into Vachon's other arm. "We have only one small problem, Tracy."

"What?" This was not something Tracy really wanted to hear right now. She squeezed Vachon's cold hand for her own comfort.

"I've taken 1700 milliliters out, but there are only five bags to replace it with. We're going to be 500 mils short! When's the last time you gave blood?"

"Um, during the last blood drive."

Nat glanced at the calendar on her wall—not quite six weeks ago. "It's a bit soon. And, I'm going to have to take twice the normal amount. It's not without risk, Trace. I want you to really think about this."

"There's nothing to think about, Natalie. Take however much you need."

"Tracy . . ."

"Nat, it's his life."

Natalie nodded her head; she would have made the same decision if it had been Nick lying there. "Okay, Trace. But I want you to go eat and drink something. There's change in my top desk drawer—go get some juice and some crackers out of the vending machine down the hall."

Tracy grabbed some change, and started for the door.

Natalie stopped her for a moment. "Tracy? You know I'd give, too, if I could, but he's already had the bag I donated yesterday."

"I know, Nat. And the last thing we need right now is for the doctor to pass out on the floor." She smiled, then headed down the hall.

Natalie was alone with Vachon for the first time. She stared down at his placid, ashen face.

"You, mister, are one lucky vampire," she whispered, almost to herself. She smoothed a strand of black hair off his cheek, then ran her fingers through the dark cloud of bangs. "I hope you realize it. You had better pull through . . . for her sake."

Nat was replacing the second empty bag with a full one when Tracy returned, two bottles of juice, two packs of crackers and cheese, and a cup of coffee in her hands. “Hey, no coffee for you, missy.”

“It’s for you. I thought you could use one about now.” Tracy set the coffee down on Nat’s desk and then plopped herself down in the chair.

“Thanks, Trace.” Nat picked up the coffee and sat down on the edge of her desk.

Tracy smiled. “I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to thank you for everything you’ve done.”

Nat smiled and shook her head at Tracy. *All in a day’s work for Dr. Lambert, Vampire-Medicine Woman,* she thought.

“I mean it, Natalie. What you’ve done tonight. . . . He would have died if you hadn’t been here. He told me you were responsible for finding the cure for that epidemic, too. How do you know about . . .?”

“Tracy, we really can’t talk about this. Not here, not now, anyway. It’s not safe for either of us.”

Tracy nodded and sipped at her orange juice. “Thank you, Natalie.”

Nat smiled at Tracy. “It’s not over yet. But, here’s hoping for the best.” She toasted Tracy with her coffee cup before taking a long, slow swallow.

A half-hour later, Tracy found herself lying on a gurney next to a still-unconscious Vachon. After a quick jab of lidocaine into Tracy’s arm, Natalie found the biggest vein she could and inserted the large-gauge needle. She connected the tubing from Tracy’s arm to the in-line filter at the upstream end of Vachon’s line. “So, how do you feel?”

“Okay. It’s a bit weird, though. I wonder if he will wake up craving apricots.” Tracy smiled to herself.

“Apricots?” Nat had no idea what she was talking about.

“He says that’s what my blood smells like. I don’t know if it’s true or not.”

“Either way, it’s one hell of a pick-up line.” She would have to remember to ask Nick about this.

❑❑❑❑❑

By four a.m., Tracy and Vachon were huddled together in the back seat of Natalie’s car as she drove them home. “Now, remember, I want both of you to rest. That means no work for you, Tracy, for at least a week. I’ll call in for you, okay? And, Vachon, if you start having those visions again, or if you start feeling weird in any way, you call me immediately! Got it?”

They replied in unison, “Yes, Doctor.”

“Good. Now, I’ll stop by Tracy’s on my way home from work and drop off some blood for you, Vachon. And to make sure you’re both doing okay.”

❑❑❑❑❑

Natalie settled Tracy into her bed and got blankets for Vachon’s make-shift bed on the couch. She shut the curtains tight before leaving. “You two be good. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

Tracy and Vachon stared at each other from their respective beds. They were both grinning weakly. He was alive, and she had risked her life to save him.

Vachon picked up the TV remote off the coffee table and waggled it temptingly at Tracy. She picked up the book on her nightstand and waggled it temptingly at Vachon.

She won.

He got up off the couch and made his way, painfully slow, over to her bed. She scooted over and made room for him under the covers. He fluffed up the pillow and propped it up against the head-board, then straightened the heavy comforter over the both of them.

He reached over, picked up her right arm, and caressed the bandage which covered the bite marks. He didn’t remember inflicting them, but he still felt badly that he had hurt her.

She gingerly touched the slowly healing scars on his cheek and neck. He took the opportunity to snatch the book off her lap. He smiled wryly at her, but she took the theft in stride and merely leaned back against her own pillow and waited for him to start reading to her.

It was a Dashiell Hammett book. Vachon loved *The Maltese Falcon*—he had read it so many times in the last sixty years that he knew it by heart. But this one, *The Thin Man*, he had never gotten around to reading.

He cleared his throat and began to read in that low, buttery-smooth voice he used only when he felt like making an effort:

“Chapter 1—I was leaning against the bar in a speakeasy on Fifty-second Street, waiting for Nora to finish her Christmas shopping, when a girl got up from the table where she had been sitting with three other people and came over to me. She was small and blonde, and whether you looked at her face or at her body in powder-blue sports clothes, the result was satisfactory. ‘Aren’t you Nick Charles?’ she asked.

“I said: ‘Yes.’”

end

Faraway Inside 2:
A Little Death

by Bonnie Pardoe

Javier Vachon's sensitive hearing picked up the sound of a key sliding into the lock of Tracy's apartment door. His eyes flew open and he was suddenly very awake. Realizing that he had fallen asleep in Tracy's bed, with Tracy asleep on his shoulder, he made a dash for the couch before Natalie entered. But he was still weak from his ordeal of the night before and made it only as far as the doorway to the bedroom.

Dr. Natalie Lambert walked into Tracy's apartment carrying a crate of blood-filled wine bottles, which she nearly dropped on her foot when she saw Vachon leaning against the door jamb. She quickly put the crate down, then rushed to Vachon's assistance.

"What's the matter? You haven't been having more visions have you?" Then she noticed Tracy sprawled awkwardly across the bed. "Oh, my God! You didn't . . . ? She's not . . . ?"

Natalie dashed toward the bedroom. Vachon roughly caught her arm; despite his weakness, he was still strong enough to stop her. ". . . Dead? No." He slightly raised an eyebrow at her accusation. "She's . . . sleeping."

Natalie glared at the young-looking vampire. His eyes were calm, languid. After a moment, she nodded slightly, then put her arms around his waist and helped him back over to the couch.

"Now you stay here this time." It wasn't a request, and he knew it. Nat went back to the abandoned crate and brought it over near the couch. "Here." She handed him a single bottle of blood as she sat down opposite him on the arm of the couch.

"Did you get this from . . . ?"

"Nick? No." Natalie stood up and paced away from him. "I haven't said anything to him about last night yet. I picked these up from your, um, church on my way over."

"Are you going to tell him?"

Natalie turned to face Vachon again. Her face held the same expression his mother's used to whenever she had caught him doing mischief. "You just wait until your *padre* hears of what you have done this time," she used to scold him. He always suspected it was she who recommended the degree of punishment which his papa would later inflict upon him.

"I haven't decided." A smile threatened to break upon Natalie's lips. "But, I'm pretty good at keeping a secret, if I have to."

Vachon smiled to himself; willful collusion was still not something he expected from adults.

"So's she." Vachon nodded toward the still-sleeping Tracy Vetter.

"It's not my decision." Nat looked as though she almost wished it was her decision.

"Nor mine." Vachon caressed the smooth, green glass of the wine bottle which lay still-corked in his lap. Nick had placed them all in an awkward situation, and Natalie was now caught in the middle of it. He gave her a brief smile of commiseration.

Nat tapped Vachon's knee with the back of her hand, then pointed toward the bottle. "Drink up."

"You've tanked me up quite well, Doctor. I won't be needing to feed for some time." A wry smile spread across his face and brought a sparkle back into his eyes.

"Look, you can either take your medicine orally or intravenously. Your choice."

Vachon quickly decided that he did not really care for needles, so he uncorked the bottle and tipped it up to his mouth.

After he swallowed, he smiled coyly up at his doctor. It was the wide smile of a little boy who now thought he deserved extra dessert simply because he had eaten all his vegetables.

Nat could not help but return the infectious grin. She then headed for the kitchen and began rummaging around for a glass.

"In that cabinet over on the left," he offered. Natalie stared out, across the bar, at Vachon for a moment. The surprise on her face was plain, but Vachon wondered if she was surprised that he knew where Tracy kept her glasses or surprised that he knew what she was looking for.

Natalie opened the indicated cabinet. Inside were neat rows of sparkling-clear glasses, arranged by height: tallest on the left, tumblers in the middle, and small juice glasses on the right. Natalie selected a large glass, then pulled out a container of orange juice from the refrigerator. She filled the glass, then headed for the bedroom.

Natalie set the glass down on the nightstand. She stared down at the still-sleeping, rookie homicide detective for a few moments before nudging her into a more natural position. Tracy was groggy enough that she smiled slightly, mumbled something, and then rolled over. Nat straightened the edge of the comforter before rejoining Vachon in the front room.

"Make sure that she drinks that juice when she wakes up, and that she drinks at least three more glasses of something today. But nothing with caffeine—no coffee, no tea, and no pop."

Vachon nodded. "Hey, Doc?"

Natalie raised her eyebrows at him, causing the vampire to wonder if anyone had ever called her "Doc" before.

"I just wanted . . . to say thanks—again."

"You're welcome." She smiled a small smile at him. "Just don't make this a habit, okay?"

"Believe me, I don't plan to."

"I'll check on you both again on my way in to work tonight, but if you need anything before that, call me. I'll leave my home number here by the phone."

"Sure thing, Doc."

"And you had better still be on that couch when I return." She waggled her finger teasingly at him, yet Vachon knew she was serious. Natalie did not quite trust him, but he was not sure if it was because of his uncontrollable rages of the night before, or simply because he was a vampire.

❑❑❑❑❑

It was several hours before Vachon woke up again; he was thankful to feel his strength finally returning. He reached over and picked up the bottle off the floor where he had set it down. He took a small sip, but that was all he could manage. He actually felt like the stuff would start leaking out of his ears if he drank another drop.

Vachon tossed off his wrinkled shirt, which had uncomfortably bunched up during his sleep. He propped the pillow a bit higher against the arm of the couch and then leaned back, drawing the blanket up to his chin and snuggling down beneath it. He stared through the open doorway into Tracy's bedroom. He could hear her slow, steady heartbeat and the shallow rhythm of her breathing.

I can't believe that you stayed, Trace. What the hell did I put you through last night? I could have killed you and yet you stayed. Ah, Trace. Vachon closed his eyes trying to remember, but no images came to him. He searched deep into his vast store of memories, but he could not recall anyone risking their life for him before.

Tracy began to stir. She rolled from her side onto her back and tried to stretch. "Uagh!" She laid still for a moment, then slowly tried to sit up. She yawned once, then noticed Vachon staring at her from his bed on the couch. Tracy smiled a small, sweet, tired smile—it made Vachon feel happy that he was still alive, that they were both still alive.

He pursed his lower lip and raised his eyebrows at her, "Sore?"

Tracy nodded slowly. "And then some, thank you very much," she added without even a tinge of malice in her voice.

"*Venir*." Vachon held out his hand to her, asking her to join him on the couch. *Far be it from me to defy the lovely doctor's orders.*

Tracy tossed the covers aside, then slid her bare legs over the edge of the bed. She rubbed the back of her neck, then just sat there for a moment, yawning again. She noticed the glass of orange juice and took a large swallow. Tracy took another sip before standing up. She then slowly made her way out into the front room.

Vachon was still staring at her, with one eyebrow raised slightly higher than the other and a lopsided grin on his face.

"What?" Tracy stopped smiling and furrowed her brows at her friend.

"Nothing. Just imagining you in something a little more . . . ah, feminine." Vachon's gaze meandered down her body and his wry smile grew wider. "Or not."

Tracy looked down at her overly-large, dark-blue Metro Police T-shirt which came down only to mid-thigh. A slight blush spread across her features and she nervously crossed her bare feet.

Vachon took the glass of orange juice from her and set it on the coffee table before pulling the blanket away and making a spot for her on the couch. Tracy glared at him for a moment before reluctantly taking the offered seat. Vachon threw the blanket across her lap, covering her bare legs, then, placing his strong hands gently on her shoulders, he turned her slightly away from himself. With her back to him now, he began to massage her shoulders. Tracy began to relax a bit under his hands. He rubbed his thumbs deep across the top of her shoulders and she let out a small moan of relief.

"Not too hard?"

"Umm umm." Tracy shook her head very slightly, causing her pale blonde hair to brush across the backs of Vachon's hands. He was tempted by the mussy locks, but instead moved his hands lower to her shoulder blades. He rubbed his palms in small circles across her back. Vachon's hands slowly migrated down the muscles on each side of her spine.

She suddenly sucked in a bit of air through her teeth. Vachon paused, but when Trace did not say anything, he continued to rub her tight muscles.

"Oooh." Tracy suddenly tensed under his hands and Vachon recognized it as a small cry of pain.

"Shh. Let me take a look." He gently pulled up her T-shirt and exposed Tracy's bare back. Her alabaster skin was marred by a smattering of bruises: a few large, some small, most very dark. Vachon gently caressed a few of the tender spots, not remembering but knowing just the same that he had been the cause of them. Vachon tenderly placed his cool lips against one of the larger bruises. Then he let her T-shirt fall back into place.

He reached over and handed Tracy the half-empty glass of orange juice, then he retrieved his wine bottle and forced down another mouthful of blood. Tracy handed him back her empty glass, and then got up. She turned back to look at him for just a moment before heading toward the bathroom; she left him with a shy, hesitant smile.

In her brief absence, Vachon took the opportunity to move the coffee table out of the way. He doubled over the queen-sized blanket and laid it in the vacated spot on the floor.

Vachon forced down another quick swallow of blood from the green bottle, before taking Tracy's glass into the kitchen and pouring in the last of the orange juice. There was only enough for two-thirds of a glass, so he looked in the refrigerator for another carton. The only thing he found was a bottle of cranberry juice.

"Huh!" Vachon had never tasted cranberries or cranberry juice—just another one of those things that never made it to the Old World during his mortal lifetime.

The vampire took the top off and gingerly sniffed at the red liquid. It had a surprisingly pleasant smell—not sickeningly sweet, but lighter with a bit of a tang. It reminded him of the warm summers of his youth—splashing in the river, the warm sun beating down and turning his skin a dark honey brown, and . . . and . . . lemons. He smiled as he remembered his cravings as a child for lemons—the exquisitely tart juice teasing his tongue as he bit a section of the fruit. He would never forget the expression on his little sister's face the first time he had given her a taste—Aurelita's dark, almost-hazel eyes squinting up and her lips puckering from the unexpected acerbity, then her eyes opening wide to match the wide grin which spread across her sweet face. He never had a whole lemon all to himself after that day.

He took another long sniff of the red liquid and remembered his mother cutting the tartness of the lemon juice with that of the orange. With a slight shrug, he added the tart red liquid to the orange juice and then headed back out to the front room.

Tracy was just emerging from the bedroom. Vachon handed her the glass of pink stuff he had concocted.

She wrinkled her nose slightly. "What is it?"

"Juice."

"No, thanks." Tracy smiled politely as she handed the untouched glass back to him.

"Hey, doctor's orders. You're supposed to drink four glasses worth today."

She narrowed her blue eyes at him. "Why?"

"I don't know." He shook his head and shrugged his left shoulder. "'Cause Dr. Lambert said so." Vachon glared at her from under his long, dark bangs and handed the glass back to her.

She held up the glass and peered at the murky contents. "I know I don't have anything that looks like this in my refrigerator. What kind of 'juice' is this?"

"Well, there wasn't enough orange juice left to fill the glass, so I topped it off with that red stuff."

"Cranberry juice? You mixed orange juice with cranberry juice?"

Vachon nodded at Tracy, unsure which part she didn't understand.

Hesitantly, Tracy took a small sip. A bit of a smile crept across her lips and she took a larger mouthful. When the glass was half-empty, Vachon took it from her and put it back on the coffee table. He then took her hand and led her over to the blanket he had arranged on the floor.

She stared down at the blanket, then up at him. He stared back, the smallest, most innocent of smiles barely gracing his lips.

She seemed pleased at the prospect of a serious back-rub and did not hesitate to step onto the blanket. She turned away from him to lie down on her stomach. He stopped her before she could kneel. With her back to him, he deftly stripped off her T-shirt.

"Hey!" She quickly moved her arms self-consciously across her breasts.

"So I can see and avoid the bruises. Okay?"

She glared at him over her bare shoulder. After a few moments, Tracy nodded her head, kneeled, then lay down on her stomach.

Vachon gingerly placed his hands on her bare waist and began rubbing the muscles above her hips. His hands moved up her sides in a slow, methodic manner, as though he had all the time in the world and nothing better to do.

The vampire was surprised at how not-hot her skin was against his own. *Must be all that blood she donated to me last night.*

Vachon was sorry that he had not been awake to enjoy the experience; though, he had never received blood intravenously before and he had no idea if the effects would have been the same as if he had drunk directly from her. *You smell of apricots and calla lilies—of a sweet spring—but what do you taste of? What luscious memories course through your veins?*

After all the blood he had been given in the last six hours he was not the slightest bit hungry. *So why am I so turned on?* He tried to brush the musings from his mind by concentrating again on the muscles in Tracy's back.

He soon found his hands at her shoulders again, so he began moving down her left arm. Tracy's arm lay limp in his hands; Vachon was pleased that she was finally comfortable enough with him to so completely relax. He slowly kneaded the muscles between his fingers, working his way down to the fine bones of Tracy's wrist, to her delicate hands. He repeated the process down her right arm, ending by stroking and rubbing each of her long, tapered fingers.

Her hands reminded him of an older cousin he had once had; she had been very gifted, playing the harp, the clavichord, and the guitar. Sarafina. She had had fine pale skin, long delicate fingers, raven black hair, and rare violet-blue eyes. Sarafina had been the one to teach him how to play the guitar. She had said it was the instrument of the soul; no man-made instrument could convey all of the possible human emotions as well as the guitar. She had a delicate hand and was very patient in all her teachings. Sarafina had taught him chords and fingerings, and eventually she had even taught him the finer points of kissing. She gave him herself the night before her mother sent her away to the convent, and she gave him her guitar the day she left for her new life serving God.

Vachon held Tracy's hand in his—idly stroking her palm. The movement of his thumb against her skin slowed and eventually stopped as he brought her hand, unconsciously, up to rest against his impassive lips.

"Vachon?" Tracy moved her thumb against his cheek to get his attention.

"Hmmm?" He blinked as the past faded from his thoughts.

"Is something wrong?"

"Ah . . . no." Vachon smiled to himself. "Sorry." He turned his mind back to Tracy, still prone on the floor before him.

He skipped over her white-cotton-panty-clad hips and began working down the outside of her right thigh, using his fingertips and thumbs to massage the strong muscles. Vachon slipped a hand under her, between the front of her thigh and the blanket, for just a moment. He noticed a few goose bumps track up her leg, and she quivered ever so slightly at the unexpected motion. He worked slowly down to her well-defined calf muscle—so firm that he merely caressed the skin with the flat of his palms. Vachon drew his hands down from just behind her knees to her ankles—feeling every inch of her smooth skin along the way.

He took up Tracy's left foot in his hands and tenderly stroked the top, rubbed the sides, then placed his thumbs squarely in the middle of her sole. Vachon pressed but did not rub this most sensitive of areas. Eventually, he reached her toes and gave them each the same individual attention he had given to her fingers.

Vachon ran his hands lightly back up her right leg and then proceeded to work methodically down her left leg. When he finished with all of Tracy's toes, he repositioned himself between her feet. He rubbed both her legs; up, pushing with the heel of his hand, and down, dragging the tips of his fingers. Vachon scooted up a bit closer and began massaging the inside of her thighs. Slowly he moved his hands higher and deeper inside, tracing the line of her femoral artery. He could feel Tracy's heart pounding fast and steady against his hands as the blood coursed through her. He realized for the first time that she must be as aroused as he was.

A small sigh escaped Tracy's mouth as she shifted her body, spreading her legs just a little bit wider in the process. Vachon took full advantage of her new position and continued massaging higher up the inside of her thighs.

Once, Vachon's hand carelessly brushed against the cotton still covering her crotch. He heard Tracy's heart give a quick, extra beat, so he brushed his hand against the cotton once again.

It was then that Vachon noticed the dark edge of a bruise showing just above Tracy's underpants. He stopped massaging and slid his finger just under the elastic and lifted it to take a closer look at the bruise.

"Hey!" A bit startled, Tracy turned over, pulling part of the blanket with her to cover her bare chest. "What do you think you're doing?" She narrowed her eyes at him and there was more than a hint of accusation in her voice.

"Just taking a look at that huge bruise on your butt. What do you think I was doing?" His face shone with pure innocence—a look he had been consciously trying to perfect since age five, but this time the look was sincere.

"I . . . I . . . well . . ." Tracy lowered her head and closed her eyes for a few minutes.

Vachon knew what she thought he was doing.

What he could not figure out was whether she really wanted him to be doing it or not.

Tracy finally looked back up and he caught her gaze. They stared at each other, unspeaking, for a long minute. Her eyes, though blue as the crystal sky just ahead of the dawning sun, had a curious smudge of brown around the pupils. As always, the young-looking vampire was fascinated by the pattern of faint, ultraviolet strands, like delicate lace, throughout her irises.

Vachon leaned forward, placing one hand beside her for support. He gently kissed her lips and was pleasantly surprised when she leaned up to return the kiss. Vachon removed the corner of the blanket covering her and tossed it back into place on the floor. He then slipped his free arm around her back, drawing her closer to him, until her bare breasts were pressed firmly against his bare chest. She wrapped her arms around his neck and allowed him to support her full weight. He finally broke their kiss when he eased her back down onto the blanket. He noticed a longing in her eyes that seemed to mirror the desires coursing through his body.

"Oh, Jav—"

"Shhh," he whispered as he feathered his fingers down over her lips. Tracy closed her eyes again and her head lulled to the side. Vachon could see her pulse throbbing just under the skin of her exposed neck. His desire for her was great and still increasing.

How can I feel this way and *not* *be hungry?* Lust without bloodlust was almost alien to him now—an emotion he had not felt in over four centuries. Not since that last night in Panama City before he had shipped out as part of Pizarro's troops. His last night of love and he never even knew her name, couldn't even recall her face.

He shook the memories from his head and returned his focus to Tracy. She looked so beautiful—her golden hair fanned out around her head like a halo, her creamy smooth skin, the curve of her breasts, of her hips . . .

He tried to remember what it was like as a mortal—when it was the giving of his life fluids instead of the taking of another's. To be able to love a woman more than once.

To have her wake up in my arms. Vachon brushed the back of his hand across her cheek again. She caught it and placed a gentle kiss on his palm.

To pleasure the same woman again and again . . . What do the French call it—orgasm? La petite mort, 'the little death.' He gazed down at her, so fragile, so innocent. *Can I give you that, Trace—just a 'little' death?* He reached over and forced down another mouthful of warm blood from the half-empty bottle. *I'd sure like to try.*

He began to massage Tracy's shoulders again, his thumbs firm against the muscles of her shoulders. His hands moved leisurely down, kneading her pectoral muscles. He trailed his fingers over her breasts and he felt her soft-pink nipples harden as he passed. With his thumbs, he rubbed the skin just below the rise of her breasts; his hands cradling the outside slopes. Vachon flicked his tongue teasingly across one of her nipples; he felt her arch her back slightly in response. He then flicked his tongue across the other hard nipple and was rewarded with a soft, faint moan from deep in Tracy's throat. He traced the outer edge of her aireole with his tongue, moving torturously slow in a spiral toward the center peak. Once there, he sucked the warm tip into his mouth. He plied his tongue across it, brushed against it with his teeth, and finally released it to the cool air. He then moved over to lavish the same exacting attention on her other nipple, all the while gently kneading the flesh around her breasts.

The vampire licked and kissed and nibbled his way down her flat stomach, while his hands continued to massage her abdominal muscles. When he reached her cotton briefs, he slipped both his thumbs under the elastic and brushed the upper edge of the curly hair enclosed there. Tracy tensed a bit and a half-moan, half-giggle escaped her lips. Vachon, not discouraged, ventured further; turning his hand over and slipping it under the edge of her panties, he caressed the coarse, tight curls, gently catching a few strands here and there along the way. Tracy relaxed again and he took the opportunity to strip the last piece of her clothing away.

He rubbed his thumbs down the outer edges of her tuft of hair—hair like sun-bleached Spanish moss. He caressed the very inside of her thighs, casually nudging Tracy's legs slightly farther apart, giving Vachon easier access to the moist and tender flesh between her legs. His thumbs brushed gently across the folds of skin. He placed a thumb on either side and gently massaged the folds in tiny circles. Tracy arched her pelvis into his hands, as she let out a long, slow sigh. Vachon continued to manipulate the delicate flesh as he added the moisture of his tongue. He slowly drew the tip of his tongue up between the folds until he reached the small nub of flesh at the top. He circled his tongue about this outcropping, flicked across it, then pressed his lips around it and sucked it gently into his mouth. Her moans and sighs were echoing through his head—all thoughts gone, except those designed to please her.

Her pulse was racing and the artery in her thigh thumped enticingly against his cheek. Vachon kissed the vein there, as his thumb slipped away and explored deeply inside her. Tracy was now inhaling air in swallows and exhaling in sudden gasps. He massaged deep inside her with his thumbs, his other fingers still possessing the outer folds of her enticing flesh.

Her moans grew louder, almost becoming screams. Tracy's hands clenched frantically at the blanket as she began to writhe beneath him. "Ah. Ah, sta . . ." she breathed desperately. "Stop. Stop!"

He did. Vachon sat up and looked at her—worried, not knowing the reason for her words. "Wha—?"

Tracy sat up and smothered his question with a kiss. She tangled her hands in his hair and continued to kiss him, hard, like he had never dared kiss her. Her hands trailed down his neck and back, over his sides, to the top of his pants. Her fingers, shaking a bit, worked awkwardly at the top button until it was finally undone. Her fingers were met, not with the tab of a zipper, but with another button. Frustration set in; she grabbed the edges of the denim fly and pulled with all her remaining strength. Each of the four buttons popped agreeably out of its hole, one right after the other. She ran her fingers inside, expecting to find cotton fabric, but her fingers found only cool skin and course hair.

"Ahh!" Tracy suddenly pulled her hand away.

Vachon heard surprise, and maybe a tinge of alarm, in her voice. "What's wrong?"

"I . . . I just wasn't expecting . . ." She fidgeted with her hands which now lay in her lap.

Vachon, almost imperceptibly, raised a thick, brown eyebrow at her.

"I just thought you'd be wearing underwear." She glanced up into his face.

"Why?" He cocked his head ever so slightly at her.

"Most guys do, ya know."

"In case you haven't noticed, Trace, I'm not exactly like most guys."

Her eyes suddenly grew wide and her jaw dropped slightly. This was obviously something she was not expecting to hear.

"I didn't mean like that," Vachon grinned at her as he clarified his previous statement. Then he reached over and stroked her hotly blushing cheek, as he had done that first night. Then he placed a gentle kiss on her unexpectedly not-trembling lips—unlike that first night, she returned his kiss.

She ran her hands over to his hips and started scooting his jeans off. He stopped her warm hands with his own.

"Are you sure this is what you want, Trace?"

Her hesitant nod grew more confident. "I almost lost you last night."

"Is that the only reason?"

"No. I . . ." She dropped her eyes from his.

He placed his cool hand under her chin and gently lifted her face up. He smiled down at her, realizing that she had wanted this for as long as he had—since that first night.

"Tracy, do you want to die?"

She furrowed her pale brows before answering with a shake of her head. "No."

Vachon reached over and forced down another quick swallow of blood from the wine bottle. "Ugh"—*I am not hungry. So, why do I want her so much?*

"I want to give this to you, Trace. And, tonight, I think I can. Are you sure?"

Her answer this time was a long, gentle kiss.

Her hands soon moved to his jeans again, and she began to work them slowly over his slender hips. He finally stood up to ease in their removal.

Vachon looked down at her from his new vantage point, extremely pleased with what met his gaze. Tracy stared up at him, and did not seem displeased by what she saw.

She ran her hands up Vachon's now-bare thighs, over his hips, and across his finely muscled stomach. She traced the line of hairs from his navel down until she found the coarse curls, like mulch across a forest floor. Her fingers found and encircled the cool trunk of his penis. Her other hand sought further and found the loose skin of his scrotum, which quickly contracted at the touch of her slender fingers. She massaged both handfuls until Vachon issued a string of guttural gasps and moans.

He did not notice the small smile which crept across her lips just before they encircled him. The sudden, moist heat which engulfed his penis surprised Vachon, and his knees almost buckled. He ran his fingers through Tracy's silken hair. This was a pleasure he had not experienced in centuries—the mortals usually did not last this long, and the vampires, well . . . *Something about fangs that close to my pepino.*

He lost himself in the sheer pleasure of her touch for what seemed like an eternity. But, when he felt that his weakening legs could support him not a moment longer, he lifted Tracy to her feet.

He ran his cool hands appreciatively over her warm skin before leading her over to the couch. Vachon pulled her close to him, then sat down on the couch, allowing Tracy to straddle him.

Vachon immediately noticed that Tracy was trembling slightly. He placed a gentle hand on her cheek and gave her a soft smile. "Hey, nervous?"

"No." Her voice was very quiet. "Scared."

"Of me?"

"Um mmm." She shook her head slightly. "Of the way you make me feel." This was the most honest and direct answer he could ever remember hearing from her.

He reciprocated, "I'm scared, too."

"You?"

Vachon was pleased to hear surprise and concern replace the trembling in her voice. He nodded and she placed a tender, compassionate kiss upon his forehead. She trailed kisses down his cheeks and he whispered low in her ear, "Be my sweet angel?"

Tracy found his lips and kissed him deeply, her eager tongue meeting his.

Vachon's hands massaged her breasts as she caressed his firm shaft, tracing the slight curve, circling over the baby-soft foreskin. Finally, with his hands supportively on her hips, Tracy guided him inside. She closed her eyes and arched her head back; neither moved again for the span of several of her rapid heartbeats. Vachon felt her muscles tighten around the base of his penis and his cool flesh being slowly warmed by the soft, enveloping walls of her womb.

She slowly rose, drawing him almost all of the way out, then she gently lowered herself onto him again. Vachon arched his hips and met her part way; a soft moan escaped the small smile on Tracy's parted lips. As she moved her hips, Vachon thrust again, driving himself deeply into her. Tracy dug her fingers into his shoulders for support. Their movements melted together as they both rocked in and out in time to the blood pulsing through Tracy's veins. She bit her lower lip, as the beat grew faster, his hands on her hips and butt helping to keep the rhythm.

Tracy put her arms around his back and pulled him closer. He buried his nose in her shoulder and lost himself in the heady scent of her heated blood. The scent seemed to cause Vachon's own heart to double its pace. *How I want you, Dulcinea.* He closed his eyes and tried to fight the overwhelming urges.

She audibly gulped in a deep breath of air and held it, then she gulped again, and again. The air escaped in small whimpers, like water lapping over the edge of a full dam.

Vachon wanted her inside him, like he was inside her—wanted with a hunger more powerful than the First Hunger! He thrust deep again, then plunged his fangs into her neck; Tracy clutched at him as he continued the small thrusts with his pelvis and smaller sucks with his mouth. He took only a mouthful of blood from her, the most he was able; her ecstasy coursed through him, her fears and desires filled his mind.

Fear of disapproval and rejection, insatiable curiosity, frustration, insecurity, the need to be loved, respected, cared for . . . These thoughts flowed freely between them. Vachon had never realized how much they were alike: what knowing him meant to her, what knowing her meant to him, how much she cared for him, and he for her.

Her cries grew louder as the first waves of orgasm finally broke through and flooded over her body. He hugged her close as the euphoria in her blood triggered his own orgasm.

As his thrusts subsided, Vachon lavished kisses upon her neck and face. His lips met hers but she did not react to the traces of blood, of sweet spring, which lingered in his mouth. Tracy rested her head against his shoulder and hugged him close. She was still breathing fast and deep; the loud pounding of her heart almost hurt Vachon's ears.

He shifted to sit lengthwise across the couch, resting his shoulders and head against his pillow. Tracy slid over, tucking herself between Vachon and the back of the couch. One of her legs rested across his; she placed her head upon his chest and idly toyed with the short, curly hairs she found there. Vachon grabbed the blanket off the floor and pulled it over her. He stroked her cheek, then drew his fingers down to the hollow at the side of her neck. His fingers lingered on the two small welts he had left; thankfully, they were not deep.

"Javier?" He was pleased to hear her pronounce his name so fluidly. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

Tracy raised her hand to his chin and stroked it gently with her thumb. "Calling you evil yesterday. I . . . didn't understand before."

Vachon placed his hand tenderly over hers. "Neither did I."

The pair soon fell into a long, deeply-contented sleep.

❑❑❑❑❑

Several hours later, Vachon's sensitive hearing picked up the sound of a key sliding into the lock of Tracy's apartment door . . .

end

The
Other
Games
Vampires
Play

by

Gabriel McFarlane

One

Tracy glanced furtively over her shoulder. Vachon was sprawled on the sofa, headphones and guitar cord linked umbilically to her new stereo system. Ever since he'd discovered his guitar and the karaoke feature worked together, he was over just about every night. Well . . . not *just* for the guitar, she supposed, smiling to herself. It was great to have him there, but . . . it was a little distracting. Especially when she was supposed to be working.

Like now.

Nick was on holidays—no one was supposed to know, but he and Nat had cooked up this big romantic getaway out in the boonies somewhere, and would be gone for a week. Great for them, but not so great for Tracy, stuck in the city with all the unsolved cases Nick got to leave behind. His last day, he'd tried hard to act sympathetic about leaving her with so much piled up, but it was no go: he was practically doing a spike-the-ball end-zone dance by the time he left.

Envious as she was, Tracy was really glad they were getting away for a while. About time, too!

But as she opened her "current" casefile on the computer, the all-too-familiar notes filling her screen, the smile faded. Ugh. The Plummer case. The bane of her existence. She had no new leads, no ideas, not a clue to go on.

The hard drive chuckled as she scrolled through the file. Tracy held her breath, wondering if Vachon could hear the tiny sound. A quick glance: no, he was deep into his playing, something complicated involving his fingers squeaking and tapping up and down the frets. With a relieved sigh, Tracy started typing:

It's not that I mind *him being over here—even if it is just about every night—it's just that it's so darn hard to concentrate! I can't complain—I mean, he's really great about it, usually puts the headphones on, even makes coffee for me, or drops in—ha ha—and picks some up at Starbucks on his way. He brought some great latte tonight, chocolate curls and all. Good thing, too: I was just about nodding off, lost in the bowels of the U of Toronto student database. Lots of respect, lots of polite, while I'm working. It's just when* I stop *working that there's a problem.*

Like now, while I'm here spinning my tires: that's when it's dangerous. Used to be, I'd just play a couple dozen games of computer solitaire, but with his darn hearing, he can always tell when I'm slacking off . . .! As long as I pretend I'm still deep in it, typing up some random notes, there's no way he can tell that I've stopped trying to track the whereabouts of failing students from Plummer's grad class in quantum physics. It's got to be a disgruntled student. Who else would kidnap his profcvkSSvopppfdddag;ll0uedsss9 ioopsaaamm5[

The automatic screen saver kicked in after eight minutes of keyboard non-activity, and Tracy's current message, DO YOU KNOW WHY BLOND JOKES ARE SO SHORT?—SO MEN CAN REMEMBER THEM! began obliviously bouncing back and forth across the blackened screen.

❑❑❑❑❑

Half an hour later, soaking in the tub, the bathroom door locked, Tracy heard an apologetic tap, and Vachon's voice: "Tracy? The door's locked." He was giving her the "I don't know *what* I've done wrong" voice, all wide-eyed and innocent. Hmph! She wasn't falling for it.

"That's so you can't come in!" she shot back. "I've got to have *someplace* all to myself!"

"I could . . . wash your back," he suggested, and she could imagine him shifting from one foot to the other, his ear to the door, listening hopefully.

"I don't want my back washed," she grumbled, but her heart wasn't in it. Vachon could deliver one dynamite back-wash. . . .

And he could tell she was wavering. That was the most frustrating part. He could always tell. Darn vampire hypersensitivity!

"I'm sorry I got so carried away," he said with an over-heavy sigh. "Maybe I should just go. . . ."

"Maybe you should!" She held her breath, waiting, and smiled when no soft footfalls faded down her hallway. He was still there.

Another soft tap-tap-tap. "Tracy?"

"What?" It was hard to keep the smile out of her voice. "I thought you said you were leaving!"

"Come on, Tracy, I said I was sorry. I know I'm a bad influence, dropping in all the time, bugging you while you're working, but you know it's 'cause I like being with you. . . ."

Tracy rolled her eyes and held her nose, sinking backwards under the water to drown out his sad pleas. When her breath ran out and she was forced to resurface, gasping, he was still going, the Eveready Bunny with fangs, scuffing his feet and rambling on about how sorry he was, that it would never happen again, and couldn't he do *something* to make it up to her? Zip out for some sour cream crullers, maybe, or a bottle of Chablis? One of his special backrubs, starting at her toes and working his way up . . .?

"Oh, all right!" she gave in, rising from the tub too quickly, a small tidal wave swooping over the edge with a splash. Pasting a fierce scowl on her face, she jerked open the door and stood there dripping. "Well?"

It was really, truly, difficult to hold the scowl. Especially with him standing in the doorway, a mischievous grin full of too-pointed teeth stretched across his face . . . not to mention the fact that he was stark naked.

❑❑❑❑❑

Joe Reese drew Tracy aside the next evening after the briefing meeting. She knew even before he opened his mouth that he must have been working up to saying whatever it was he wanted to say, and it was going to be unpleasant.

"Vetter . . . listen, I know it's none of my business, but as a friend—and I hope you know you are a friend, not just one of my detectives—"

"Um, sure, Captain," she cut him off quickly. "Is anything wrong? I know I'm getting nowhere on this Plummer case, first him and now tonight this woman, Concetta White, but I'm tracking down every lead I come across. It's got to be related to the university, him teaching, her working in the cafeteria. But I just haven't figured out what his game is, or how he—"

"It's not about the case, Tracy."

The captain's eyes had gone all sad and serious. And he'd called her "Tracy," not "Vetter." As he gave her wrist a little tug, leading her to a chair and sitting her down, she suspected she was going to get the little girl treatment. If he hadn't looked so desperately unhappy, she might have found it funny.

"Turns out my niece Jenny's subletting the suite right below yours—just for the month, till her place is ready at the U of T residence. Well, she came to me and asked if I couldn't say something if it happened again." He ducked his head, gesturing vaguely. "And obviously, it has."

"What has?" *If what happened again?* she thought in confusion. *Did I screw up?—But he said it wasn't about the case—*

"Tracy, I know you probably think this is nobody's business but yours, but it hurts to know what you're doing."

*Uh-oh,*Tracy thought with a jolt. Whatever he was working up to, she had a bad feeling about it.

Joe Reese glanced up, looking miserable. "Tracy . . . it's your choice of men."

Men? But there was only one man in her life and—Her heart gave a sudden lurch. Was he talking about Vachon? Nobody even knew about Vachon but Nick, and even he didn't know the half of it. Trying for casual, nearly choking on it, she shrugged. "What do you mean? I'm not even going out with—"

"Tracy." His flat, heavy tone caught her like the sudden slice of a knife. "It's no use. We know exactly what's going on between the two of you."

Oh, God—! she thought wildly. *How can they know?* "Listen, Cap, I can explain—"

"Explain?" he repeated, sweat breaking out on his broad forehead. "*Explain*? This kind of relationship is *sick*, Tracy! Can't you see that? It's not normal—*he's* not normal!"

"Ca—Captain Reese, please, I—" She could scarcely breathe, her heart was pumping so hard, all the way up in her throat. *But we've been so careful!* she thought in a panic. *How can anybody know?*

The tears slowly rolling down her cheeks seemed to mollify him, and he settled heavily onto the edge of the desk, staring at her in deep concern.

"How did you ever get yourself into this?" he asked quietly. "I always thought you were a pretty level-headed kid, Tracy, but this—!"

"He's—the best thing in my life, Captain," she declared in a shimmery voice as she swept her sleeve across her eyes. "I love him. He's—"

"Oh, give me a break!" the captain growled, slapping his desk. "He *abuses* you, Tracy! How happy can that make you feel? Oh, sure, maybe he treats you pretty good most of the time, bringing you coffee and fancy donuts, playing you love songs on his guitar! He sure puts on the nice guy act whenever Jenny sees him heading to your floor. But then you do something—who knows what, some stupid little thing, forget the ketchup for his eggs, don't feel up to sex when he does, come home late from work—I've seen it before, a friend of mine, Jake Cahill, nice guy on the outside, but a real bastard to his wife—" He smacked the desk again, running out of words.

"Oh, damn . . ." he sighed, giving her that sad-eyed fatherly look again. "Damn it all to hell, Tracy . . . ! You don't have to take that kind of treatment. Nobody does."

Tracy belatedly realized her mouth was agape. She shut it, shaking her head. "You think . . . he *beats* me?"

He shot her a look of such angry sorrow, she quickly shut her mouth again.

"How else do you explain it?" he demanded. "How come you're wearing a turtleneck, Vetter? It's June, for God's sake! It's like a furnace in here, I'm dying in this shirt and tie, and you're wearing a damn turtleneck to cover up the bruises on your neck and arms!"

Tracy felt the hot rush of blood to her cheeks, and the captain gave a soft "Hah!" of triumph.

"It's not . . ." Tracy began, but let it fade away, unable to think of what to say to explain it. A grin spread across her face, nervous relief escaping in a rush. "You've got it all wrong, Captain. All wrong!"

"Can you honestly tell me you aren't black and blue under that shirt?" he asked. "Jenny said when she saw you doing laps in the pool this afternoon before shift, you had bruises all over your neck, like bite marks!"

Tracy shrugged, bluffing. "We were kidding around the other night, giving each other hickeys—"

"This isn't something to joke about!" Then his voice softened, and he slid off the desk to put his hands on her shoulders, pleading: "You don't have to take it, Tracy. Please. You can get a restraining order. I've already talked to Judge Wilkins and he—"

"What?" Tracy gasped. "You didn't!"

Doggedly, he pressed on: "If you need help, if you want me or Nick to come over—he'll be back on Monday, remember—we can help you kick the bastard out—"

"Captain—"

"—We'll be there for you. Or if you want me to put a car out front, we can haul him down to Holding, let him cool his heels for a day or two—"

"Captain!" She stood, feeling like she'd throw up. What could she say? She had to tell him something! "He doesn't beat me. The bruises . . . they're just . . . accidental."

He didn't look convinced; she hurried on, knowing exactly how it sounded, just like her mom trying to cover up for her dad, the abusee trying to protect the abuser.

"We . . . play games." She tried for another grin. "Sometimes it gets a little out of hand," she finished lamely. "You know."

"No, I don't!" he snapped. "I've got official complaints, here, Tracy! Jenny's willing to go to the wall for you. I've got her deposition—want me to read it to you? 'I heard her scream—it was a bloodcurdling sound, pure terror. And then there was this big thump, like he'd thrown her against the wall. Then another scream—more like a shriek—I thought for sure he was killing her. I was just about to pound on the ceiling when I heard the bed, *squeak-thump! squeak-thump!* and her shrieking like he's tearing her apart. And the sound he made when he—' " Reese closed the report quickly, sweating bullets. "Well, that's enough. You get the picture."

"Oh, *that*! It's nothing. A misunderstanding, okay?" Tracy waved it away with a another desperate attempt at casual.

"I was working late, caught up in what I was doing and . . . Well, Va—my boyfriend kind of . . . surprised me. Maybe I let out a little—" She searched for another word, couldn't find one. "—shriek, okay? And as far as when we're—" She could feel her face radiating heat, knew she was babbling. "—I make a lot of noise. Always have."

"What about the bruises? Jenny said this wasn't the first time she's seen you black and blue."

"I bruise easily," she countered. "One of my old boyfriends used to call me 'banana lady' because I was always—"

"It's not funny!"

"Sorry. No. It's not funny." It wasn't; no one knew that better than she did, having seen her dad bully her mom for so many years. Assault was never a laughing matter, between lovers or strangers. But her relief was nearly overwhelming. It was all she could do to keep from breaking into nervous giggles. "It won't happen again."

"It better not! And if there's another complaint, or if you come in here next week covered from head to foot in the sweltering heat, it won't be a restraining order I'll get from Judge Wilkins—it'll be a warrant. Aggravated assault, Tracy. I'll put him away if he lays a hand on you again!"

❑❑❑❑❑

Tracy rode up the elevator to her apartment in silence, all the laughter blown out of her. *What am I going to do?* she wondered bleakly.

Silence greeted her as she opened the apartment door. "Vachon?" She felt a glimmer of hope. If he was here, he'd usually have made his presence known by now. He'd said something about the Raven, she remembered, playing a set with the band that was there this week. Maybe he wasn't coming tonight. As she shrugged out of her jacket, she darted a quick glance down the darkened hallway. "Vachon? I'm home."

Still no reply.

She was glad he wasn't there. It would give her a chance to try to think it through, figure out what to do. But at the same time her heart sank, the empty apartment seeming so quiet and flat without him there.

There was a soft metallic scrape from above her, the tiniest giveaway sound, heard too late. Just as Tracy started to turn, mouth half-open in a fruitless attempt to shout "*No—!*" Vachon, eyes blazing golden, hurtled down on top of her.

He pulled her sideways as they fell, taking the brunt of it, and they thrashed together wildly, slipping on the hallway linoleum, Vachon trying to pin her, Tracy scrabbling frantically to get free. She managed to wrestle her way to her knees, fingernails scraping on the edge of the sofa. If she could just get to the—

Growling, Vachon pounced, dragging her down again. With his arms clamped round her, he hunched and nudged and bunted her around until she was on her knees, and he surrounded her, his cool breath raising goosebumps across the back of her neck. She felt the tips of his teeth prick her, and she let out a moan of frustrated defeat, slumping to the floor in a heap. His tongue darted out, frosty cold and, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop a piercing shriek as he started licking the ticklish spot under her ear.

"What d'you say?" Vachon chuckled breathlessly. "Two falls out of three?" This time his tongue probed her ear, nearly making her wet her pants.

"Don't!" she cried, gasping. "Vachon—! Don't, I—! Stop it! Stop it, damn you! *Stop!*"

His eyes went from brilliant gold to coffee brown in a blink and he relaxed his grip at once, turning her in his arms. Since the first moment he'd tasted her, there'd never been a question of *no means yes*: all she had to do was think about stopping the game, and he stopped, immediately. Fangs or no fangs.

When he saw her stormy face, the tears, he was stricken. "Tracy, what is it? Did I hurt you?"

"No . . ." She sagged in his embrace. "I just . . . oh, darn it, Vachon, let me up. We've got to talk."

Two

Vachon got to his feet, pulling Tracy up. "So? What's this all about?"

"It's the captain . . ." she began with a sigh, and told him the whole thing. Doing her best to keep it light-hearted. (*They think you're beating me up—isn't that hilarious?*) and blameless (*They hardly mentioned the bite marks, just the bruises.*)

It wasn't good.

For all his flippant outward attitude, Vachon didn't have what Tracy considered a real solid grip on self-assurance. He readily admitted he'd pissed away pretty well four hundred years, just having fun—and running from the Inca. Running from responsibility. Now he'd found something he wanted to stick around for, someone he wanted to stay with, but it wasn't that simple. There were a lot of wrinkles to be worked out—like whether staying together meant for the next four years or the next four hundred—but the biggest wrinkle was sex. Making love to somebody with fangs and whose idea of foreplay was what most people would call a life and death struggle was always going to involve some bumping and scraping and physical wear and tear on her, no matter how careful he was.

And she didn't want him to be careful, not if it meant he couldn't let go and enjoy things as much as she did. That wasn't fair in a relationship, one of them always having to tippy-toe around.

"But if I'm hurting you . . ." Vachon slid his hand round the back of her neck, and she felt his fingers skittering over the raised, swollen spot he'd left the night before. That one was definitely her fault: she'd found an incredibly ticklish place on his belly, just a quarter-sized spot. She'd given him a short, sharp, jab and he'd flinched so violently, leaping straight up about three and a half feet, they'd both gone crashing to the floor, giggling and shrieking like a pair of five-year-olds.

"I don't want to have to censor myself," Tracy said. "Especially not for some nosy downstairs neighbor!"

"I don't think we have a choice." Vachon was on his feet, gathering up his guitar.

"Wait!" Tracy cried. "I'll go talk to her! I'll convince her there's nothing—" But Vachon was already pushing open the window. A moment later, he was gone.

Tracy flung herself down on the sofa with a whispered curse. This was the one thing she never wanted to happen—making Vachon think what they were doing was wrong, that it couldn't work. Like she was doing something she didn't want to, just for him. Allowing him to hurt her, pretending she liked it when in truth she didn't.

"Nosy neighbors . . ." she sighed, blinking back tears. She could remember, all too clearly, how unsure he'd been about the whole thing, taking that first step, going a little further the next time and the next time, never really letting go. She'd finally got him talking, and was surprised to find he was worried she'd figure what really got him off was dreadful, shameful, real perverted stuff.

They'd been sprawled in a sweaty tangle across her nearly-destroyed bed, the slow, almost nonexistent beat of his heart under her ear a wonderful surprise. "I never thought I'd feel like this," Tracy said, more to herself than Vachon.

"It's blood loss," he said, making her smile. "You're probably dizzy."

"No, I'm just . . . relaxed." (*Maybe a little dizzy,* she admitted to herself. *But an okay kind of dizzy. A floating, buzzing, not-thinking kind of dizzy. . . .*)

"You know . . ." she mused, ". . . it always used to make me cry. I don't know how anybody could stand me. Every single time . . . even if it was great, firecrackers and the earth moving and all that stuff . . . I'd always burst into tears after."

"I thought it was me." His voice was the barest whisper.

"Nah," she assured him. "I told you then, it was just me. Just a nervous reaction, like—"

She hesitated, unsure whether to go on or not. "My old boyfriend, Marty? He used to *laugh.* Goofiest thing. Embarrassed me half to death until I figured out he wasn't laughing at *me,* just—laughing."

"Are you serious?" Tracy smiled at the dubious note in Vachon's voice. "You mean, when he . . .? He *laughed?*"

"Yeah." She shrugged, feeling herself blush, wondering if he could see it as well as feel it in the dark. "It took a while to get used to it, but I gotta admit, it was kind of sweet. Like it was always—fun. Isn't that the way it should be?"

Another dubious sound. "You're asking the wrong guy. The kind of games *I* used to play didn't exactly end up being much fun for the women I was with. Mmm . . . Your hands are so warm. . . ."

"You like that?" She'd been idly stroking his leg, but began moved her hands up to massage his back, eliciting a soft groan. "When I think back, it's no wonder Marty used to laugh. We were always playing games, like a couple of crazy kids."

Vachon writhed under the pressure of her fingertips. "What—kind of games?" he asked with another groan.

She rubbed her cheek back and forth across his, tickling herself on the stubble. "You should shave once in a while. —Just dumb games. You don't want to know."

"Yes I do—" His back arched as she scrubbed hard little circles into the small of his back with her knuckles.

She decided he wasn't really listening, too caught up in her hands to pay much attention, so she told him. "Cops and robbers was a good one. We'd take turns. . . . I handcuffed him to the bed once, surprised the heck out of him. What else? Rock star and groupie—I'll bet you'd like that one. And we got a lot of mileage out of vampire and virgin, too."

"Really?"

There was something more than just curiosity in his voice, and Tracy couldn't resist: "You like the idea, don't you?"

"I . . . yeah. Yeah. But . . ."

Tracy absorbed his confession in silence. Rising on her elbows over him, her mouth nearly touching his, she murmured, "Do you ever think about . . . chasing me?"

He shivered, not replying. His eyes, seen only as shadows, were black and unreadable. Tracy bent over him, clasping him with her knees. She could feel him trembling, doubt rising in him like a great, cold river. Taking her time, she cupped his face in her hands, kissing him slowly, thoroughly. When she drew back, he followed, and she closed her teeth on his lower lip, worrying it gently, deliberately.

"You'd never be able to catch me," she challenged, grinning. "Maybe you'd take the first couple rounds, but I'd get you in the end."

"You think so?" It was too dark to see his expression, but she could hear his answering smile.

"I know so," she said confidently. He pulled her back down with a hungry growl.

* * *

A phone call from Jenny, the nosy neighbor downstairs, broke into Tracy's pleasant retrospection. Embarrassed, apologetic, the captain's niece still stuck to her guns, giving Tracy pretty much the same speech her uncle had: Nobody has to take abuse, Tracy. Uncle Joe and I just want to help you. If you ever need a place to stay—

"Jenny, it was a *hickey,* for God's sake!" Tracy groaned. "He doesn't beat me, I swear it. Why won't anybody believe me?" The worst part was that it *was* a hickey—a particularly spectacular hickey with two punctures in the middle.

Finally managing to end the conversation by promising to go out for dinner with them on Sunday evening, Tracy hung up feeling minimally more cheerful. Supper with the worried uncle and niece, happy conversation reassuring them that everything was just fine. Maybe she could stop by the used CD place on Spadina and see if they'd found a copy of the Doors album Vachon had been looking for. If it stayed warm for two days, until Sunday, maybe she and Vachon could take the tape deck up on the roof, lock the door, and play out some rock star fantasies.

But what if he didn't come back? A CD suddenly seemed a pretty cheap bribe. Vachon hadn't made a big fuss over the captain's accusations, but then again, Tracy thought with flagging spirits, he never made a fuss. He just went away and stayed away when something was bothering him. After poor Screed died, she hadn't seen Vachon for weeks.

The prospect of never again seeing him sprawled on her sofa playing his guitar, those stupid headphones half-lost in his hair, filled her with such despair that she sank down at her desk, her head in her crossed arms, and wept.

She couldn't even have a good cry without interruption. The phone rang again: this time it was the day-shift captain, Brady, with more great news: the U of Toronto kidnapper had snapped up a third victim, one who had nothing at all to do with the university. This one was a retired navy officer who lived close to the campus, nothing more.

"This is nuts!" Tracy cried as Brady outlined the few details they'd managed to scrape together. "No ransom note? No phone calls? What the heck is he up to?"

"I don't know," Brady sighed. "Hey, you don't want a burglary case, too, do you? Everybody's on holidays, and this is tied to the university, so it's sort of related to the kidnappings—"

"Oh, sure!" Tracy said, somewhat hysterically. "Give me another one! I'm batting a thousand here! I can solve anything!"

There was a pause. "You okay, Vetter? I heard you were having some trouble with your boyfriend—"

"I'm not having any trouble with my boyfriend!" she shrieked. "Give me the case! Please! Anything!"

After getting a promise from Brady that he'd fax her a floor plan of the lavish mansion that had been burglarized and a list of possible missing items, Tracy put her answering machine on, and turned on her computer. Maybe she could channel all the stress into something useful.

Three

Vachon didn't need to be bribed with music; he was back on his own by sundown on Sunday. But when Tracy came in from her late meeting with the University Kidnapper Task Force—dinner with the Reeses had been put off till Monday—Vachon was merely sitting on the sofa instead of hiding behind it waiting to spring at her. They had a quiet evening and, after she put in a listless hour at her computer, going round and round in circles, they went to bed.

Neither could muster much interest in making love, too aware of the threat of Joe Reese and the SWAT team sweeping down on them if Tracy so much as squeaked.

"This is pointless," Tracy groaned, lying on her back staring at the ceiling. The sun would be up in another hour. "Are you asleep?"

"No."

She threw back the covers, heading for the kitchen in search of a drink or a sandwich—or her gun. TV wasn't what she wanted, or food; after a few frustrated circles round her living room, Jim Morrison crooning from the CD player, and Vachon echoing him from the shower, she finally flopped down at her computer.

Vachon padded out of the bathroom a few minutes later and, as much at a loss as Tracy for something to do, stood behind her and massaged her tight shoulders while she scrolled through her notes.

"What the heck is his game?" she complained. "What's he *doing* with these people? Surely there's some connection besides the fact that he's grabbing them at or near the university! And then there's this stupid burglary. Somebody breaks into this old guy's mansion—he used to work in the library at U of T, that's why Brady stuck me with the case—whoever it is rummages through the place, and doesn't seem to take anything."

"Nothing at all?"

"They think maybe—*maybe*—some tools are missing from the garage, and some of the guns from the owner's collection. There's nobody home to confirm it, though. Just the gardener, one stoned-out cookie named Alphonso Verde. If you ask me, his deposition's next to useless. We found a six-foot marijuana tree in the greenhouse, and a five-kilo stash of dried weed under his mattress."

"Where's the homeowner?" Vachon asked, working on a particularly stubborn knot on the side of her neck.

She tilted her head, groaning. "In Hawaii, according to the gardener."

"Hawaii? In June?"

Tracy shrugged. "Maybe he doesn't like crowds." Then she glanced over her shoulder at Vachon, frowning. "It is odd, though . . ."

Tapping at the keyboard, she switched documents.

"Yeah, according to the airline, he picked up his ticket at the last minute, and flew out six days ago—" She switched again, scrolling quickly. "—the *same day* the kidnappings started! Does that seem as odd to you as it does to me?"

Vachon didn't say anything. Belatedly, Tracy noticed his hands had stopped moving, She wriggled under his fingers, but he seemed distracted.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know . . ." His fingers began absently kneading her shoulders again, and she closed her eyes with a luxurious sigh. Almost immediately, he stopped again.

Tracy regarded him quizzically.

"Vachon? You think there's a connection? Between the kidnappings and the burglary? The librarian's house and U or T are within a few miles of each other, but . . . it's a pretty big stretch. Plummer's probably the most important victim, being the first," she went on, thinking aloud. "The woman from the cafeteria—who knows? Maybe the kidnapper lived in residence and hated the food. Then the old guy, Mostaza, from the Navy—"

"Mostaza," Vachon said absently, correcting her pronunciation. "You know—"

"—Mostaza," Tracy agreed. "That's Spanish, eh? He doesn't seem to fit with the university at all. He wasn't even grabbed at U of T—he was playing pool in a bar, ten blocks away, and was lured away by an 'emergency' phone call. At least Brenda What's-her-face was a student. What the heck was her last name?"

"Peacock," Vachon said, puzzlement in his voice. "You know what's funny? Their names are all colors. Brenda Peacock. Concetta White. The navy colonel, Mostaza—it means 'mustard.' The gardener, Alphonso Verde. And then the professor—

"*Plum!*" Tracy spun in her chair to stare at him, chills zinging down her back.

"I don't believe this!" she cried, disgusted with herself for not clueing into it earlier. "He's playing with us—Professor Plum and Miss Peacock and Colonel bloody Mustard! He's playing *Clue*!"

She lunged for the phone, punching in Joe Reese's number at the station.

❑❑❑❑❑

It had been, by all accounts, a truly stupid case, more prank than anything else—except for the fact that a number of people had been locked up against their will and terrorized by a certified wacko.

"Turns out," Joe Reese said as he pressed the buzzer Monday night in Tracy's lobby, "he'd been released from the psychiatric assessment center just six months ago. His doctor was sure he was completely rehabilitated."

"What did he do?" Nick asked. He and Natalie, just back from their "separate" vacations, "just happened" to both be at Nick's place when the captain called to invite him to come along to dinner.

"Tried to beat his mother to death with a sneaker," Reese said with a rueful shake of his head.

"She probably waxed him at Monopoly," Natalie suggested, deadpan.

Reese glanced at his watch, then buzzed again. "Strange. I thought Tracy was going to meet us down here at eight. Maybe we should go on up and see—"

"Yes?" Tracy's breathless voice cut in over the intercom.

"It's Joe Reese, Vetter. I'm here with Jenny. Nick and Natalie are here, too. Are you ready?"

"—Ready? For what?"

"What's that noise?" Jenny whispered urgently, poking her uncle in the back. "Listen! There it is again!"

"To go for supper," Reese reminded her, and put his ear close to the grille to try to catch the strange sound they'd heard when Tracy held the Talk button down. There was something—someone shouting.

"Oh, I'm—ah—I'm kind of . . . busy," Tracy stammered. There was definitely someone shouting in the background, and he didn't sound pleased at all.

"I don't think I can—" She let go of the button momentarily, and the silence was frightening.

"He's there!" Jenny cried. "He's up there now! Did you *hear* him?"

Nick and Natalie exchanged glances.

"Who's up there?" Nick demanded. "What's going on?"

Joe Reese leaned on the button again, shouting, "*Tracy*! Tracy, can you hear me? Are you all right? —Jenny, quick, give me your keys!"

"Captain, it's okay!" Tracy's voice came shrilly over the intercom again, but it was too late. They were already on their way up.

❑❑❑❑❑

She met them at the elevator in a baggy blue housecoat clenched tight to her throat, but they could still see the livid bruise on her neck like a colorful tattoo. Natalie's mouth dropped in shocked recognition—she had a bruise or two just like it, some on the inside of her right thigh and one on her neck, hidden by a bright chiffon scarf—but before she could think of anything to say, Tracy announced, "Look, guys, I'm sorry. I forgot all about dinner, and I'm just about to get in the tub—"

Some small sound caught her attention and she turned, poised like a deer ready to flee. It was at that moment that Nick, like Natalie, must have noticed what Tracy had on under the robe: something extremely form-fitting, made of shiny black leather. Or maybe vinyl.

Natalie caught him gaping and gave him a sharp elbow in the ribs. Then she noticed something else: Tracy was hiding something behind her back—a bra? She took a sideways step, peering past Joe Reese glowering in the doorway.

Not a bra: a black hood with a mask. Leather. With pointed ears. Bells started to go off in her head.

"Ah, Captain . . ." she began, feeling herself color up to the roots of her hair. "I don't think we—"

"We heard someone shouting," Jenny said to Tracy in an urgent whisper. "Is—*he*—here? You're not in any danger, are you, Tracy?"

"No, no—" Natalie was trying to say. Nick was whispering in the captain's ear, using a particularly persuasive tone.

Blushing, Tracy dropped her gaze. A wicked grin lit her face. "Danger? I don't think so."

Joe Reese was backing away from the door, a puzzled look on his face, as if he'd forgotten why in the world he was at Tracy's door in the first place. Nick turned his attention on the captain's niece. "Jenny—forget it. I think you've misread this . . . ah . . . situation."

"We've . . . misread the situation. . . ." she repeated slowly. Then she turned brightly to her uncle. "Gee, Uncle Joe, we misread this entirely. There's no problem."

Nick offered Tracy an apologetic grin as he and Natalie hustled the confused uncle and niece toward the elevator. "Sorry for the interruption."

"Apology accepted, partner," Tracy replied with a smile, and closed the door.

❑❑❑❑❑

Turning, she padded barefoot back to the bedroom and, pausing in the doorway for effect, she let the robe slip to the floor.

On the bed, secured to the head- and footboard posts with four sets of handcuffs, Vachon growled at her, not looking much impressed with the skin-tight black vinyl suit she wore. "This wasn't unfair and you know it! Handcuffing me while I'm dead to the world—!"

She slouched insolently against the doorjamb, silent and well-pleased with herself. She'd even managed to wriggle his dead-to-the-world buns into a pair of teeny-tiny little Speedo-sized spandex underwear festooned with bright yellow *Batman* insignia. They were, she decided, quite attractive. Silly as heck, but attractive.

"All's fair in love and war," she announced smugly.

Vachon lowered his voice, changing his tone to a soft, wheedling murmur. "Let me go, Tracy. Please. If you do, I'll . . . do anything you want. A backrub? Breakfast—and the dishes? Tracy . . . come on . . .! I'm begging you . . . *please* . . . don't do this. You want to let me go, don't you? Sure you do. Come over here and unlock the handcuffs . . ."

"Nice try," she chuckled. "Too bad I'm a resister. But this is payback, buster! I told you: I'd get you in the end."

Pushing away from the doorjamb, she dangled the mask in front of him, flexing the fingers of her left hand experimentally. "Now that I've unmasked you, Batman, I'm going to torture you . . . unless you'd like to reveal the secret whereabouts of the Batcave. . . ."

"Tracy, please—!"

She rolled her eyes with a sigh. "I *told* you not to call me that, Batman."

He redoubled his efforts to get free, managing to gouge some nasty scars in the head and footboards. Panting, he shook his hair out of his eyes and glared at her balefully. "You'll—never get away with this!"

She clicked her tongue as she tossed the mask over her shoulder and unzipped the skin-tight vinyl suit. "You disappoint me, Caped Crusader. . . ."

He groaned, his eyes betraying him, going from brown to pale liquid fire. He was trembling from head to foot, hugely aroused . . . and desperately trying not to laugh. "You'll—never get away with this—Catwoman!"

"Much better!" She stepped out of the black outfit and took a sauntering step towards him, climbing onto the bed. Flexing her fingers again, she admired her captive. "Now, Batman . . . was it that spot on your belly that was the most ticklish—"

"I'm begging you, don't—!"

"—or was it the spot behind your knees? Hmmm . . . I can't seem to remember. I guess I'll just have to try *both*—!"

end

Author's confession: I actually wrote this a few years ago with an entirely different set of characters. But when a fellow FK *fan told me the title of an episode I hadn't (and still haven't) seen—"Games Vampires Play"—I knew I had to do some recasting. Who was in the original story? Vincent and Diana from* Beauty and the Beast. *The original inspiration? A Calvin and Hobbes cartoon that shows:*

1) *a blissfully sleeping Hobbes;*
2) *Calvin sneaking up on him;*
3) *Calvin blowing a big, noisy "BPBPBPBPPBP!!!" on Hobbes' stomach; and finally:*
4) *a battered and mangled but still grinning Calvin saying "It's a high price to pay, but nuzzling tiger tummies is one of the great pleasures of life." ;-)*

Now tell me, honestly: are you ever going to be able to look at Vachon again and not imagine him in Batman *underwear? ;-)*

—Gabriel

Reunion

by

J. S. Levin

Vachon was waiting for Tracy when she got home, which was not surprising. He had his guitar plugged into her sound system and the headphones thoughtfully on his head so that he didn't disturb her day-working neighbors. His fingers flashed over the fretboard and strings in some complicated pattern, but despite that, he looked up instantly as she walked in the door.

"You're home early," he noted, shoving the headphones back.

She nodded and shut the door, walking toward him, pulling off jacket and shoulder holster as she did. "For once, Toronto the Good is living up to its reputation, and Nick even volunteered to help with the paperwork. So, we got to go home early as a reward."

"Cool." He swung his feet off the couch, then sat there, looking at his guitar.

She frowned. "What's wrong, Vachon?"

He was silent a moment longer, before looking up. "Trace, would you . . . would you do me a . . . a favor?"

She rocked back. This was a first—and pretty important, too, from the sound of it.

"I don't know," she answered truthfully. "What kind of favor?"

He sighed and set the guitar down carefully, then pulled off the headphones and set them aside as well.

"Come with me down to the lake. I . . . I want to go by Screed's . . . Screed's grave." His eyes didn't meet hers. She could see his teeth clench, behind the thin line of lips. It had been close to two months now, but he still seemed to hurt like it was yesterday.

There was only one thing she could say. "Okay. Just let me change, huh?"

❑❑❑❑❑

He insisted on flying, not wanting even her nondescript car to mark where they were going. She didn't protest very much—that part, at least, she knew would be fun. She put her shoulder holster back on again and threw a denim jacket over it, he pulled the zippers on his black leather jacket tight and slung a knapsack over his shoulder, then they were up into the darkness above the streetlights, heading for the larger darkness of Lake Ontario.

It took only moments, and they were standing on the shore, a little dark area tucked away from all the lights and activity. Vachon set her down, then strode a little closer to the water, lights from a tethered ship letting her see his frown. She followed him, nearly slipping on the slick, broken ground.

"What's wrong?" she asked, barely above a whisper.

He looked up.

"I'm . . . not sure." He looked around, then knelt in the churned earth, setting a hand flat against it. "But something sure is. I didn't leave it like this . . ."

"Well, 'bout time you got yer bloody Spanish arse down here!" an unexpectedly familiar voice complained. It was hoarse, and not very loud, but neither of them had ever expected to hear it again. "Drop me in a hole an' leave me, V-man?" the Cockney continued. "Not so much as a by-yer-leave or a bloody daisy fer an old mate?"

Vachon seemed to have been nailed to the ground. Tracy was sure her feet had sunk to the ankles in the mud and become encased there for all time; she concentrated very hard on convincing her knees to continue to support her weight. But the Spaniard was grinning like a maniac from his crouch, staring off into the darkness which wasn't nearly as dark to his eyes.

"I poured a whole bottle of LaCroix's Special Reserve on your grave, sailor . . ." he said softly. "I can't believe it's you."

"Oh, it's me, all righty-o, somewhat th'worse fer wear!"

Vachon finally pulled himself to his feet and moved towards the voice, and Tracy found her feet would move after all. Keeping a few discreet feet back, she watched in amazement. "How?"

The English vampire was rather the worse for wear indeed: leaning up against a rock, more ragged, dirtier and thinner than she'd ever seen him, his eyes going from gold to fire red as she stepped closer. "Still hangin' round, Fruit? Don't ye know we're bad fer yer health?"

Vachon sat down on the rock and snapped, without turning, "Trace, stay back."

Screed laughed shortly. "Safer'n she's ever been in my company, Jack," he told his friend, raising an arm in a gesture which ended in a heavy drop to Vachon's knee. He used the leverage, with the other vampire's help, to struggle into something closer to a sit than a sprawl.

"Bout th' best I can do right now. I'm lucky t'have me head outta the ground, fer that matter, but—" He gave an awkward shrug and grinned rather viciously "—where there's ships, there's *always* rats!"

Vachon nodded and slid the backpack off his shoulder.

"I . . . thought I might need this," he said.

The backpack made a glass-on-glass clink as he set it down, and Screed's eyes narrowed hungrily. "That your fancy-ass stuff, or have ye been raidin' my larder?"

"Thought you'd prefer your own," the other vampire retorted, fishing out a bottle and handing it over.

Screed yanked the cork out and upended it, drained it in three gulps, rolled it out of his hand and reached for the next one. Vachon shoved the backpack closer, then settled back, content to watch as his old friend fed.

Tracy touched a hand to his shoulder, keeping Vachon between her and the Cockney.

"Mind giving me *some* idea what's going on?" she asked.

He chuckled, and reached up to lay his hand over hers.

"I'm not sure," he admitted, glancing up. "I've been feeling something—an . . . itch in the back of my head. I can't describe it. But I knew it had something to do with Screed. It was weird—kind of scary."

He shrugged. "Tonight, I knew I had to get down here. But I didn't want to come alone . . ."

Scared to find out he was right? she wondered. Or scared to find out he was wrong? Either way . . . "I thought he was dead."

Screed lowered bottle number five, empty. "Guess I'm not all that easy t'kill after all," he agreed. "Although I ain't *thought* I was so close t'checkin' out since I first met ol' Vachinetto there, way back when . . ."

❑❑❑❑❑

The ship rolled hard as a wave crashed over her. Vachon pressed his back against the hard wood of her keel and groaned. He hadn't liked ships before he became a vampire, and he liked them even less now. He hated ships, he hated the Aztec god Hurrican who blew up these damned storms, and he hated the English on whose ship he'd been forced to stow away—it had been the only thing leaving the port of San Juan de Ulua' fast enough to get him out of the Inca's reach. So what if it was heading into a part of the New World he knew nothing about, where no one spoke a word of Spanish and the great Armada inspired curses rather than awe. It was away, and that was just about the only thing he cared about right now.

The ship rolled the other way, and he curled up into a ball, muffling his groans in the coarse cotton of his shirt. Of all things, he was seasick, his stomach rolling worse than the sea and his head feeling like he was wearing a too-small helmet. He was hungry, too, in the moments when the cramping abated, and there seemed to be nothing safe to hunt on this damned bucket but an over-abundance of rats.

He hated the taste of rat blood.

Standing back in the shadows of the thick, tropical vegetation, listening to the barely comprehensible croakings of the English seamen, he'd thought this tub big enough and well-manned enough that, with his hard-learned caution, he'd be able to survive the trip handily, if not comfortably. How was he to know that, in the balmy weather of the Caribbean summer, the sailors were more likely to sleep sprawled on the deck than crowded down below, where a hungry vampire had the chance of sneaking a mouthful or two of their hot blood. And there wasn't a single part of the galleon's deck that couldn't be seen by the men on watch, damn their eyes and the bright tropical moon.

Then this storm had blown up, and chased them around the Gulf of Mexico for three days now. He wondered vaguely whether it was himself, or the heretic English, who drew the wrath of the pagan gods of this land. Not that it mattered. If the ship went down, they'd all be equally dead.

The ship heeled over again, so far that he bit his lip waiting for the water to come pouring into the gunports, swamping her and taking her down. But somehow, she righted herself again, shuddering from the wind which screamed like a demon from hell—or an Inca coming at you with a whirling axe. He wiped the blood from his chin, licked his fingers and wondered if Santa Maria would listen to a vampire afraid of drowning . . .

Sometime during the storm, he fell asleep, arms wrapped around his knees and his head pillowed against a sweet-smelling bag of West Indian sugar.

When he woke, the ship seemed to be sitting still. At last. He was so grateful not to be tossed against the gunwales anymore that he didn't even care if they were becalmed, or even aground. His head ached, and hunger set his veins on fire. Stiffly, he unclasped his arms and stretched his legs, listening grimly for the scrabble of tiny feet.

Three dead rats later, he scowled and pulled himself into a sitting position. Someone was coming. The hatch overhead was thrown back, and blinding sunlight arrowed down. He winced and pulled himself farther back into his hiding place.

"It do look dry, sir," a voice commented from the opening. "No breach here."

An authoritative voice rumbled, "You can't see squat from the deck, Screed. You and Pine and Kelly get your asses down there and check it out good. That sugar's the most valuable thing we've got on board—it had better be dry!"

Si, Vachon thought viciously. *Send your sailors down here, Capitan. I'm hungry enough to take them all. I'll sail your ship at night for you,* Anglo; *and leave just enough of you to keep the riggings during the day . . . Of course, you'll end up in La Coruna instead of your London . . .*

No, killing the sailors would only result in his own death, dragged screaming and burning onto the deck. He'd been close to that death once too often already. But maybe just a few mouthfuls, from one or two of them, enough the wash the taste of rats out of his mouth for a little and put some strength back into his limbs . . .

An argument on the deck, English too fast for him to follow. Annoying. If there were going to be English all over the *Nuevo Mundo*, he should probably learn the language a little better. Finally, the sailors slung a ladder into the hold and followed it down, carrying the lanterns they knew they'd need once out of the sun's light.

He could certainly hide well enough for them not to find him; and perhaps hide he would. There was the trick his Master had shown him, how to reach through a man's eyes to the thoughts in his head, and put his own thoughts there. . . .

* * *

Screed was the first one to respond to his promptings, and return surreptitiously to the hold that night, careful that no one saw him slide back down into the tiny room with its cargo as valuable as gold. Vachon caught him as soon as he stepped away from the square of light from the hatch, one hand clamped across the mouth and forcing the chin up, the other catching the hand which clawed for the long knife at his belt.

On his knees behind the sailor, he bent Screed back against his shoulder, breathing the scent of pitch and salt water and the sweet, heady wine of blood beneath it all. Then he reared back, bared his fangs, and struck.

Dios, the taste of human blood again, so hot, so rich! He pressed his mouth hard over the wounds and drank deeply, rocking Screed against him like a lover, so enthralled was he by the hot fountain that danced down his throat. Rat blood faded to a distant, unpleasant memory. The heat spread though him, warming places he hadn't realized were cold, sparking strength again in limbs that had had almost none for days.

He could hear his own purr of satisfaction rumbling through his chest, like the great jaguars of the forests which his Master had told him were his brothers. The blood was so good . . . so good . . .

Screed's heart stuttered against his lips, and he pulled up fast, hoping he wasn't too late. The sailor was gasping, limp against him, sweat beading the bald dome of his narrow head. *Too much, too much!* There was no way he could safely dispose of a body, no way he'd finish this damned trip with a corpse for company, but the *Anglo*'s heart was not steadying. Quite the contrary, it was growing shakier by the beat.

In desperation, he did the only thing he could think of. Sliding the sailor into his lap, he raised his own wrist to his mouth, sharp fangs slicing through the blue lines of veins. Then he pressed the bleeding wounds to Screed's slack mouth.

"Drink, *Anglo*," he whispered. "Drink if you want to live."

The sailor's heart gave four more staggering beats before his lips closed on Vachon's wrist and he swallowed of his own accord. Two beats later, a long-fingered hand came up, clamping tight. Vachon shuddered. He'd never felt anything like this—even his Master's mouth against his own throat, her own blood in his mouth hadn't been like this. Painful, a draw that seemed to pull every vein in his body taut. Wonderful, like the seconds just before orgasm. Finally, he could stand it no longer, and wrenched away from the Englishman.

Screed came up out of his lap, eyes opening as he reached up to draw Vachon's wrist back.

"Wot th' hell??" He focussed on the Spaniard. "Who th' bloody hell are you?"

"Javier Vachon," Vachon admitted. "Listen to me, *Anglo* . . ."

The sailor rolled his eyes.

"Oh, bleeding wonderful. Not only do we have a stowaway, Screed old man, but he's a damned Spanish, too!" He rubbed a hand over his head, then frowned and slid his fingers down his neck.

"What have you done to me, you bastard?" he demanded, reaching for the knife in his belt.

Vachon spread his hands.

"*Perdon*," he said helplessly. "I was hungry. But I didn't want you to die."

Screed licked his lips slowly, tasting the blood still in his mouth. "Bloody... now that's a joke! Bloody fer real! You drank my blood, you..."

The Spaniard held up his wrist. "You drank mine, too, *Anglo*. Now you are like me—there was nothing else I could do. It was that, or let you die."

"Well livin's better than dyin'," Screed acknowledged grudgingly, "but what kind o' livin're you doin', hiding down here and..." His fingers danced across the place on his neck that had been wounded moments before.

"She called me a Child of the Night—a Warrior of the Night..."

"Oh, certain-a-ment! Some warrior you are, you stowaway!"

❑❑❑❑❑

Tracy fell off her heels laughing, and leaned against Vachon as she caught her breath. "Oh, God, I can just *see* the pair of you, sitting down there!"

Once she got used to his accent and penchant for slang, Screed told an amazingly good story. Vachon tended to be rather sketchy with detail, always wondering if, like his first confessions, something he told her would make him look bad. Screed didn't care—the story came first, and the hell with what she thought.

The carouche chuckled and grinned at her, less maliciously than ever. He reached for yet another bottle. Vachon had brought him a round dozen, and a good thing, too.

"Oh, it was a fine night," he agreed. "There we were, Fruit, him hittin' his black head every time he tried to turn around—too damn tall for the bloody hold—"

Tracy looked up at Vachon and blinked. He was no taller than she; they traded off being taller based on which shoes they were wearing.

Vachon blinked back. "I know, but I was *tall* back then, Trace. Really tall. Towered over everybody, just about. I was running messages because my legs were so long, they figured I could do it in less time."

Of course, he was the youngest and least well-connected of them, too, but forget that for now. They were dead, he was alive, and that was, after all, the best revenge.

"Didn't do you a particle o'good shipboard," Screed pointed out. "An' it never seemed t'keep th'Inca off yer arse, either, that I recall."

Vachon rolled his eyes, and his friend laughed.

"That's what he looked like that night," he told Tracy. "Tryin' his damndest t'explain t'me I'd be drinking blood not grog from here out. Then tryin' in th'same fool breath t'tell me why we couldn't kill me mates—like I had no idea how many men it took to keep a ship afloat and under sail, an' him a land lovin' armor rat!"

"Do you want to sit here all night insulting me," Vachon broke in, "or would you like to move to more comfortable surroundings?"

"Let me guess," the carouche replied, "you stripped me pad an' sold what ye didn't want..."

"Like you had a damned thing I wanted," Vachon snapped back. "No, I just... cleaned it up a little, and hid stuff I didn't think you'd want found. I..."

He shrugged, as helpless as he had been that night in the English galleon's hold. "I always meant to go back and finish up..."

"Well, thank th' Lord ye didn't!" Screed looked down at his filthy clothes. "Hope you didn't think me togs were one o'the things ye needed t'tidy out."

"Shirt, pants and stuff wrapping the bottles."

Screed looked. "So they are. Cool. Nice work, V-man. Thank ye very much."

He pushed himself to his feet, rather gingerly. "Well, me legs seem t'be working now. That's a point."

He raised the bottle in his hand and drained it. "Ah, that's better."

He brushed a futile hand over his dirty sweater, then looked up at Tracy ingratiatingly. "Say, Fruit, how d'ye feel about lendin' an old salt yer shower, eh? Not one of th' things me present accommodations is quite set up for."

She stood up, realizing she towered over him by half a head and more. "Oh, right! What am I, the Young Vampires Charity Association?"

Vachon's eyes widened and he grinned. "I'll buy that."

She slugged him in the shoulder. "Oh, hush, you moocher."

❑❑❑❑❑

Screed cleaned up almost frighteningly well, Tracy thought, watching him pull on another baggy sweater over a plain T-shirt, then settle down on the edge of her couch to pull on socks and boots.

"Ah, that's th'ticket. Thank ye, Detective Missie Vetter; ye've a kind heart. No brains fer th'company ye keep, but a good heart." He pantomimed listening to said heart, a rapt expression on his face.

"Quit it, Screed. You don't scare me."

He went back to tying his shoes.

"Never did, did I? Me or th'V-man." He looked from her to Vachon and shook his head. "No sense.

Either o'ye."

Vachon had settled back into his favorite corner of the couch, one of his own bottles by his side and his guitar across his lap.

"When I want your opinion, I'll ask for it," he told his friend.

"Didn't miss *me* much, did we now!"

The black-haired vampire lifted the bottle to his lips for a long swallow.

"I missed you like hell," he admitted. "Like a piece of me was gone."

Screed became very interested in a twisted bootlace. "Well, now, ain't that touchin' . . ."

Tracy was sitting in the chair by Vachon, a coffee cup in her hands. "What I want to know is how the hell you're alive. I mean, I *know* Vachon was dying—I saw it. And he said you *had* died. But now . . ."

The carouche straightened up. "Do I look like a ruddy scientist t'you, Fruit? I dunno! I thought f'r sure the next person *I'd* be seein' was ol'Scratch himself, askin' me if I'd like it hot or hotter, but no! Wot I do know, I ain't lookin' a gift horse in th'mouth, not me."

"Don't let Screed fool you," Vachon interjected. "He's not as ignorant as he likes to pretend."

Screed folded his arms. "I'm as ignorant as I want t'be, ye Spanish prig. None o'that!"

Vachon took another drink. "Sure, sailor. Whatever you say."

Tracy sipped from her cup, letting the hot coffee slowly draw the chill damp of Lake Ontario out of her hands and the pit of her stomach.

"You know," she said thoughtfully, "I'll bet there is someone who *could* figure out what happened . . ."

Vachon knew *exactly* what she was thinking. "Dr. Lambert? Knight'll have my guts for garters, and probably your head while he's at it, Trace. Are you crazy?"

"Natalie's been studying vampires—well, Nick, anyway—for almost five years, Vachon," she pointed out. "And I'll bet she'd want to know about this."

"Dr. Lambert?" Screed queried. "That nice bit o'toast ye brought t'see me, V-man? The one who stuck a needle in me an' took what I didn't have t'spare anyway?"

"That's the one," Vachon agreed with a sigh.

"I wouldn't mind seein' *her* again."

"Knight'll take you apart and let the rats have *you* for lunch," Vachon suggested.

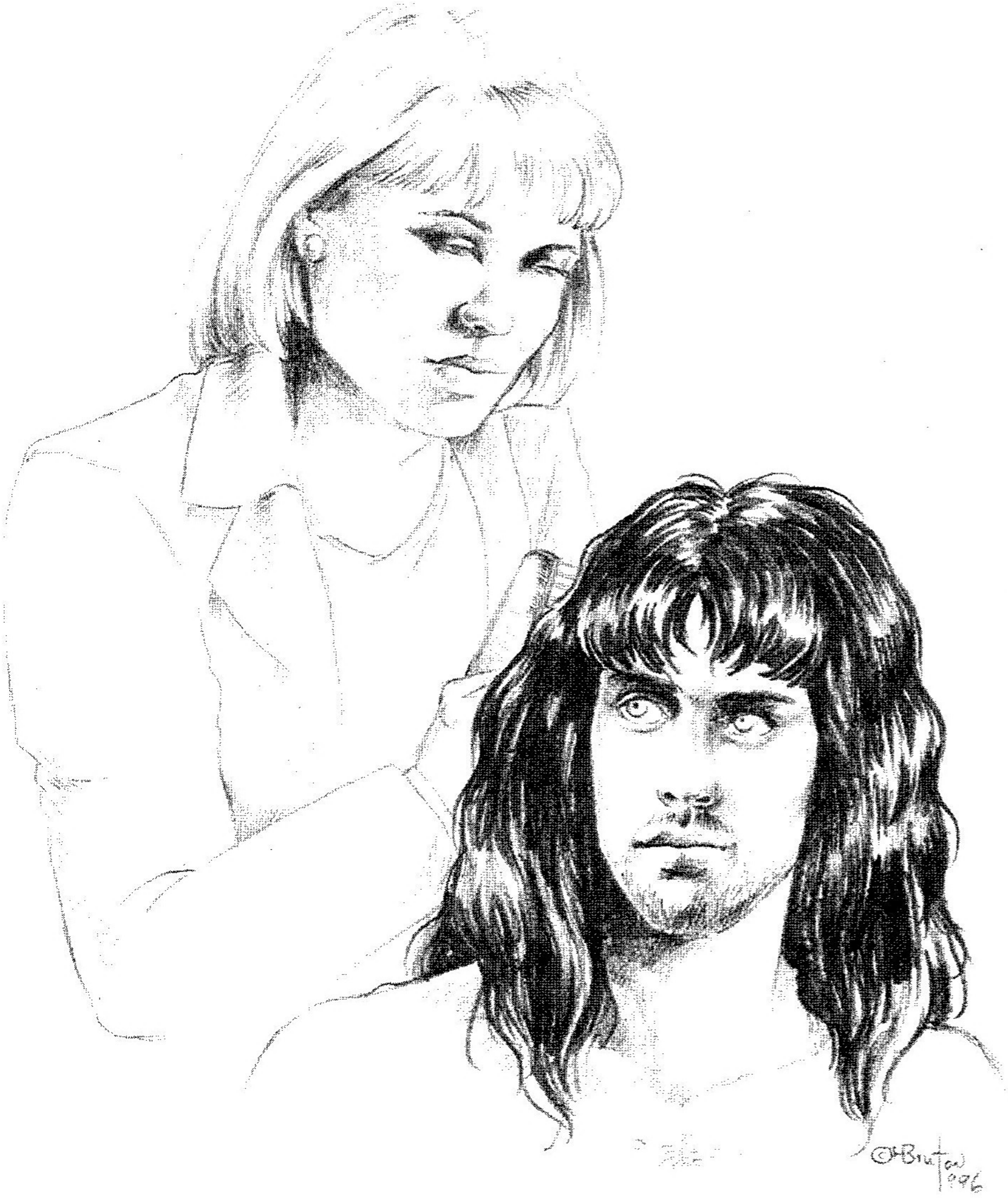
Screed gestured, and Vachon handed over his bottle. The carouche took a drink, swallowed, and handed it back, muttering, "Now, *him* on t'other hand, Defective Knight, I seen too much o'him th'first time I saw him. Bloody Enforcer, that's wot he is."

"I think it's a good idea," Tracy protested, too caught up in her idea to have quite caught Screed's judgment, which was probably just as well. "Vachon, look at how much she knows already—and how much it's helped you people! Why, you'd've died . . ."

"Enough, Trace!" he held up both hands. "You go talk to Knight about this one, 'cause I for one am *not* about to."

He looked over at his friend and raised his bottle in salute. "I know all I need to right now."

end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